Whatever you do,
you must never speak
to the Wicked.
If you see them,
hide.
KINGDOM OF THE WICKED
PAPERBACK BOXED SET
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LITTLE, BROWN

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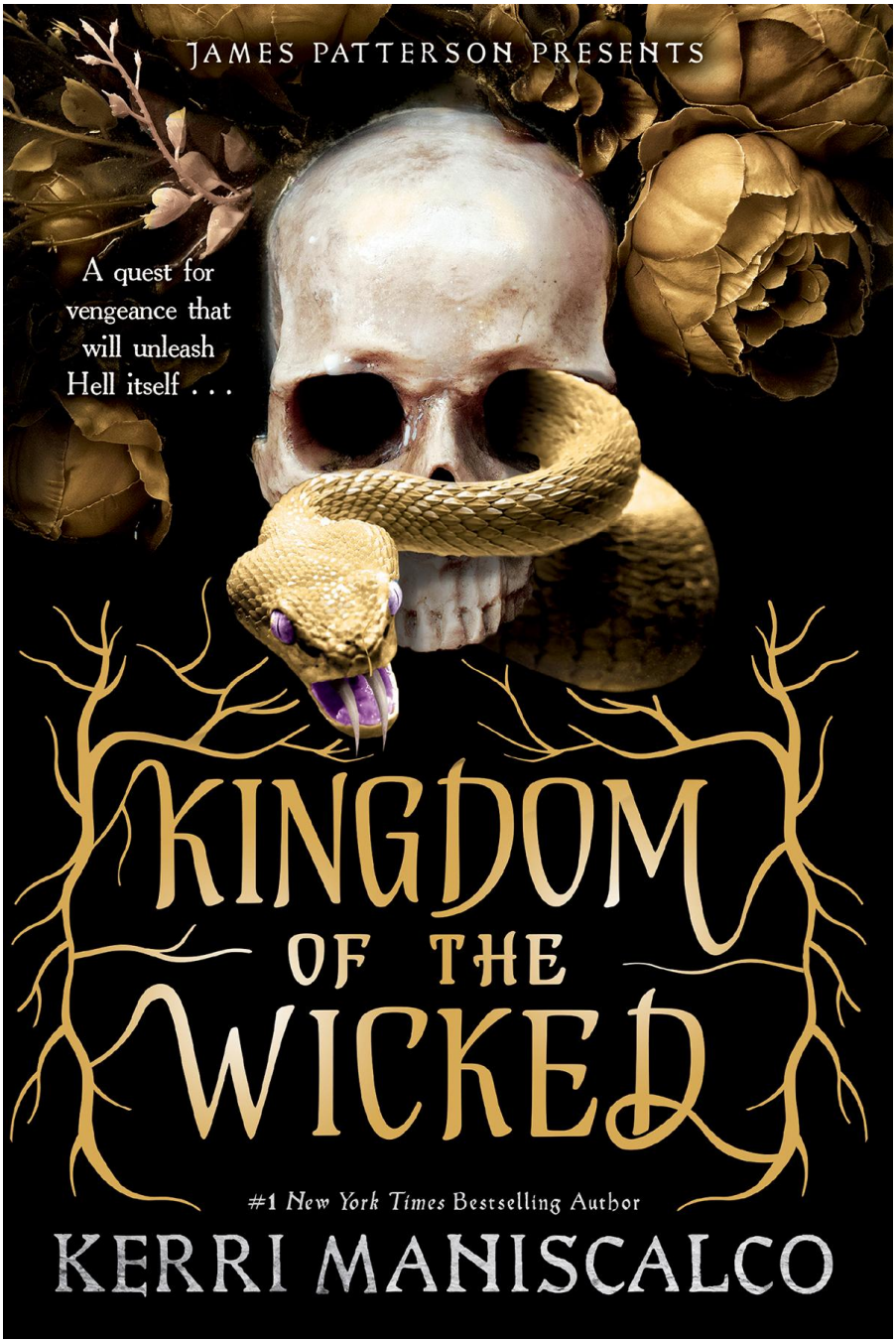
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A quest for vengeance that will unleash Hell itself . . .
KINGDOM OF THE WICKED
#1 New York Times Bestselling Author
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For my grandmother Victoria Marie Nucci and my aunt Caroline Nucci.

And for my great grandparents—who immigrated from Sciacca, Sicily, to America—whose restaurant inspired much of this story.

This may be a fantasy, but the love of family found within its pages is very real.

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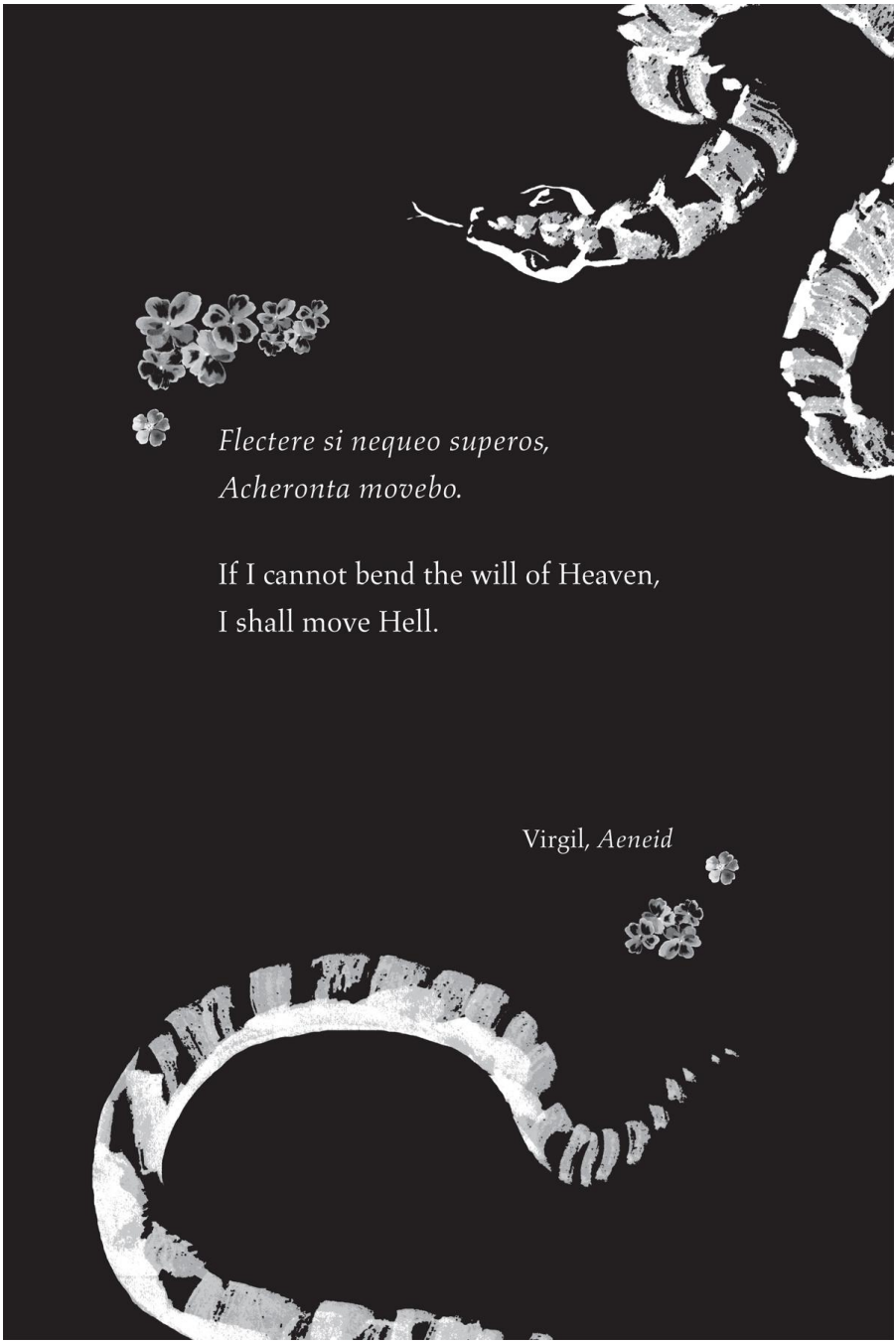

Flectere si nequeo superos,
Acheronta movebo.

If I cannot bend the will of Heaven,
I shall move Hell.

Virgil, *Aeneid*

PROLOGUE

Outside, wind rattled the wooden chimes in warning. In the distance, waves crashed against the shore; the frantic whispers of water growing louder as if the sea was a mage summoning violence. On this date—for nearly a decade now—the storm followed the same pattern. Next, thunder would roll in quicker than the tide with lightning cracking electric whips across an unforgiving sky. The devil demanded retribution. A blood sacrifice for power stolen.

It wasn't the first time he'd be cursed by witches, nor would it be the last.

From her rocking chair near the fire, Nonna Maria monitored the twins while they chanted protection charms she'd taught them, a *cornicello* clutched tightly in each of their little fists. Pushing the howling gusts from her mind, she listened closely to the words Vittoria and Emilia whispered over the horn-shaped amulets, their matching dark heads bent in concentration.

"By earth, moon, and stone, bless this hearth, bless this home."

It was the start of their eighth year and Nonna tried not to worry over how quickly they were growing. She pulled her shawl closer, unable to ward off chills in the small kitchen. It had little to do with the temperature outside. As much as she tried ignoring it, sulfur snuck in through the cracks along with the familiar plumeria-and-orange-scented breeze, raising the graying hair she'd swept up from her neck. Had she been alive, her own human grandmother would have called it an omen and spent the evening on her knees in the cathedral, rosary clutched close, praying to saints.

The devil was on the prowl. Or one of his wicked brothers was.

A sliver of worry slid in as quick and smooth as one of her paring knives, lodging itself near Nonna's heart. It had been an age since the last sighting of the Malvagi. Hardly anyone spoke of the Wicked anymore, except in stories told to frighten children into staying in their beds at night.

Now adults laughed at the old folktales, all but forgetting the seven ruling princes of Hell. Nonna Maria never would; their legends

were burned into her mind, branding her with a bone-deep sense of dread. The area between her shoulders prickled as if their midnight eyes were upon her, watching from the shadows. It was only a matter of time before they came looking.

If they hadn't begun to already. One didn't steal from the devil and go unpunished.

Her focus darted back to the twins. Like the churning Tyrrhenian Sea, there was a restlessness about them tonight. One that spoke of unseen trouble to come. Vittoria's charms were rushed and Emilia stumbled over hers, trying to keep up.

A twig popped in the fire, quickly followed by another. The sound like wishbones snapping over their spell books; a warning in its own right. Nonna gripped the arms of her rocking chair, her knuckles turning the color of the blanched almonds lying on the counter.

"*Calmati!* Not so fast, Vittoria," she scolded. "You'll have to begin again if you don't do it correctly. Do you want to gather grave dirt alone in the dark?"

Much to Nonna's dismay, Vittoria didn't appear as frightened as she should have. The thought of wandering around a graveyard under the light of a full moon and an angry storm seemed appealing to the child. She pursed her lips before offering a slight shake of her head.

It was Emilia who answered, though, giving her sister a warning look. "We'll be more careful, Nonna."

To prove her point, Emilia held up the vial of holy water they'd gotten from the monastery and tipped it over their amulets, allowing one drop to sizzle over each. Silver and gold. An offering of balance between light and dark. A gift for what had been stolen all those years ago.

As above, so below.

Pacified, Nonna watched as they finished their charm, relieved when white sparks rose in the flames before burning red again. Another year, another victory. They'd tricked the devil once more. Eventually there'd come a day when the charms wouldn't work, but Nonna refused to think of that now. She glanced at the windowsill, pleased by the dried orange slices laid out in even rows.

Lavender sprigs hung to dry over the mantel, and the tiny stone island was covered with both flour and fragrant herbs waiting to be tied into neat bunches. Verbena, basil, oregano, parsley, and bay leaves. The scents mingled pleasantly. Some were for their celebratory dinner, and others for their charms. Now that the protection ritual was done, they might enjoy their meal.

Nonna looked at the clock on the mantel; her daughter and son-in-law would arrive from the family restaurant soon, bringing with them laughter and warmth.

Storms and omens or not, all would be well in the di Carlo home.

The flames settled and Emilia sat back, biting her nails. A nasty habit Nonna was determined to break. The child spit a nail clipping out and went to toss it on the floor.

"Emilia!" Nonna's voice rang loudly in the small room. The child started, dropping her hand, and gave a sheepish look. "In the fire! You know better than to leave things for those who practice *le arti oscure*."

"Sorry, Nonna," Emilia mumbled. She chewed her lip, and her grandmother waited for the question she knew was coming. "Will you tell us about the dark arts again?"

"Or the Malvagi?" Vittoria added, always interested in stories of the Wicked. Even on nights they were forbidden from uttering such names. "Please?"

"We shouldn't speak of dark things aloud. It invites trouble."

"They're just stories, Nonna," Emilia said quietly.

If only that were true. Nonna Maria traced a protection charm over her heart, finishing it with a kiss to her fingertips, and exhaled. The twins exchanged triumphant grins. It was impossible to keep the legends from the girls, no matter if it filled their heads with dreams of the seven princes of Hell. Nonna feared they romanticized demons too much. It was best, she decided, to remind them why they should be wary of beautiful creatures without souls.

"Wash your hands and help roll the dough. I'll talk while you make the *busiate*."

Their matching smiles warmed the chills still clinging to Nonna brought on by the storm and its warning. The little corkscrew pasta served with tomato pesto was one of the girls' favorite dishes. They'd be pleased to find cassata already waiting in the ice box. Though the sweet ricotta sponge cake was an Easter specialty, the girls loved it on their birthday.

Even with all of their precautions, Nonna was unsure how much sweetness would remain in their lives, and spoiled them often. Not that she required extra incentive to do so. A grandmother's love was its own sort of powerful magic.

Emilia pulled the mortar and pestle from the shelf, face strained in concentration as she gathered up the olive oil, garlic, almonds, basil, pecorino, and cherry tomatoes for the pesto alla Trapanese. Vittoria removed the damp cloth from the mound of dough and began rolling the pasta as Nonna had taught her. Eight years old and they already knew their way around the kitchen. It was unsurprising. Between their home and the restaurant, they practically grew up in one. They both peered up from thick lashes, their expressions identical masks of anticipation.

Vittoria said impatiently, "Well? Are you going to tell us a story?"

Nonna sighed. “There are seven demon princes, but only four di Carlos should fear: Wrath, Greed, Envy, and Pride. One will crave your blood. One will capture your heart. One will steal your soul. And one will take your life.”

“The Wicked,” Vittoria whispered, her tone almost reverent.

“The Malvagi are demon princes who stalk the night, searching for souls to steal for their king, the devil, their hunger ravenous and unyielding, until dawn chases them away,” Nonna continued, slowly rocking in her chair. The wood creaked, covering the sound of the storm. She nodded toward their tasks, making sure they held up their end of the bargain. The girls settled into their work. “The seven princes are so corrupted by sin, that when they cross into our world, they can’t bear being in the light and are cursed to only venture out when it’s dark. It was a punishment sent from La Prima Strega, many years ago. Well before man roamed the earth.”

“Where is the First Witch now?” Emilia asked, an edge of skepticism creeping into her little voice. “Why hasn’t she been seen?”

Nonna thought carefully. “She has her reasons. We must respect them.”

“What do the demon princes look like?” Vittoria asked, though she must have had this part memorized by now.

“They appear human but their ebony eyes are tinged red, and their skin is hard as stone. Whatever you do, you must never speak to the Wicked. If you see them, hide. Once you’ve caught a demon prince’s attention, he’ll stop at nothing to claim you. They are midnight creatures, born of darkness and moonlight. And they seek only to destroy. Guard your hearts; if given the chance they’ll rip them from your chests and guzzle your blood as it steams in the night.”

No matter that they were soulless creatures who belonged to the devil, or they’d kill them on sight, the twins were enchanted by these dark and mysterious princes of Hell.

One more so than the other, as fate would have it.

“But *how* will we know when we meet one?” Vittoria asked. “What if we can’t see their eyes?”

Nonna hesitated. They’d already heard so much, and if the ancient prophecy held true, she feared the worst was yet to come. “You just will.”

Steeped in family tradition, Nonna Maria taught them magical ways of hiding from both humans and the midnight creatures. Each year on their birthday, they gathered herbs from the tiny garden behind their home and made charms of protection.

They wore amulets blessed in holy water, freshly turned grave dirt, and sparkling shafts of moonlight. They recited words of protection and never spoke of the Malvagi when the moon was full.

More importantly, they were never without their amulets.

Emilia's *cornicello* was made of silver, and Vittoria's gold. The girls weren't allowed to bring them together, or something terrible would happen. According to Nonna it would be like forcing the sun and moon to share the sky, bringing the world into an eternal twilight. There, the princes of Hell could escape their prison of fire for good, murdering and stealing souls of the innocent until the human world turned to ash—like their nightmare realm.

After they devoured their dinner and cake, the twins' mamma and papa kissed them good night. Tomorrow they'd begin helping in the family restaurant's busy kitchen, their first real dinner service. Too excited for sleep, Emilia and Vittoria giggled on their shared mattress, swinging their horn amulets at each other like tiny fairy swords, pretending to fight the Malvagi.

"When I grow up, I want to be a green witch," Emilia said later, cradled in the nook of her sister's arms. "I'll grow all kinds of herbs. And have my own trattoria. My menu will be crafted of magic and moonlight. Like Nonna."

"Yours will be even better." Vittoria's grip tightened in comfort. "By then I will be Queen, and I'll make sure you have whatever you like."

One night they decided to be brave. Nearly a month had passed since their eighth birthday and Nonna Maria's dire warnings seemed a lifetime ago. Vittoria thrust her amulet at her sister, her face determined. "Here," she commanded, "take it."

Emilia hesitated only a minute before clasping the golden horn in her palm.

A shimmering lavender-black light exploded from their amulets, startling Emilia enough that she dropped her sister's necklace. Vittoria swiftly fastened it back where it belonged, brown eyes wide as the glittering light abruptly faded. Both girls remained silent. Whether in fear or fascination, they couldn't be sure. Emilia flexed her hand, trying to work out the pin-prickling sensation crawling under her skin. Vittoria watched; her face hidden in shadow.

Nearby a hellhound howled up at the moon, though later they'd convince themselves it was only the wind snarling through the cramped streets of their quarter. They never told anyone what they'd done, and never spoke of the strange inky-purple light.

Not even to each other. And especially not to Nonna Maria.

Since they pretended the incident away, Emilia didn't tell her sister she'd been irrevocably changed—from that evening forward, whenever she held her *cornicello* and concentrated, she saw what she'd call *luccicare*. A faint shimmer or aura surrounding a person.

The only exceptions being herself and her twin.

If Vittoria also possessed this new talent, she never admitted so. It was the first of many secrets the twins would keep from each other. And would prove deadly for one.

ONE

Ten years later

Nonna Maria buzzed around the kitchen like she'd guzzled every drop of espresso in our restaurant. Her mood was downright frantic. My twin was late for dinner service and our grandmother saw it as a portent of doom, especially since Vittoria was out the night before a holy day. Goddess forbid.

The fact that the moon was not only full, but also a putrid shade of yellow had Nonna muttering the kind of warnings that normally made my father bolt the doors. Thankfully he and Uncle Nino were in the dining room with a frosty bottle of limoncello, pouring after-dinner drinks for our customers. No one left Sea & Vine without sipping the dessert liqueur and feeling the utter satisfaction and bliss that followed a good meal.

"Mock me all you like, but it's not safe. Demons are prowling the streets, searching for souls to steal." Nonna chopped cloves of garlic for the scampi, her knife flying across the worn cutting board. If she wasn't careful, she'd lose a finger. "Your sister is foolish to be out." She stopped, immediately shifting her attention to the little horn-shaped amulet around my neck. Worry lines carved a deep path around her eyes and mouth. "Did you see if she was wearing her *cornicello,* Emilia?"

I didn't bother responding. We never took our amulets off, not even while bathing. My sister broke every rule except that one. Especially after what happened when we were eight.… I briefly closed my eyes, willing the memory away. Nonna still didn't know about the *luccicare* I could see shimmering around humans while holding my amulet, and I hoped she never would.

"Mamma, please." My mother raised her gaze to the ceiling as if the goddess of sky might send an answer to her prayers in the form of a lightning bolt. I wasn't sure if the bolt was meant for Nonna, or my mother. "Let's get through dinner service before worrying about the Wicked. We have more pressing problems at the moment." She

nodded to the sauté pan. “The garlic is starting to burn.”

Nonna mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like “*So will their souls in Hell if we don’t save them, Nicoletta,*” and I bit my lip to keep from smiling.

“Something’s terribly wrong, I feel it in my bones. If Vittoria isn’t home soon, I’ll go looking for her myself. The Malvagi won’t dare to steal her soul around me.” Nonna brought her cleaver down on an unsuspecting mackerel, its head flopping to the limestone floor.

I sighed. We could’ve used it to make fish stock. Nonna was *really* getting herself worked up. She was the one who’d taught us the value in using every part of an animal.

Bones, however, could only be used for stock, not spells. At least those were the rules for us di Carlos. *Le arti oscure* was strictly forbidden. I scooped the fish head into a bowl to give to the alley cats later, banishing thoughts of the dark arts.

I poured some chilled wine for Nonna, adding orange slices and sugared peels to sweeten it. In moments, condensation bloomed like morning dew across the glass. It was mid-July in Palermo, which meant the air was stifling at night, even with our windows open, coaxing a breeze.

It was especially hot in the kitchen now, though during colder months I still wore my long hair up because of the soaring temperatures created by our oven fires.

Sea & Vine, the di Carlo family trattoria, was known across Sicily for our sinfully delicious food. Each evening our tables were crowded with hungry patrons, all waiting to dine on Nonna’s recipes. Lines formed in the late afternoons, no matter the weather. Nonna said simple ingredients were her secret, along with a touch of magic. Both of those statements were true.

“Here, Nonna.” We weren’t supposed to use magic outside of our home, but I whispered a quick spell, and, using the condensation dripping onto the stone, slid the drink along the counter in front of her. She paused long enough in her worrying to sip the sweet red wine. My mother mouthed her thanks when my grandmother’s back was turned, and I grinned.

I wasn’t sure why Nonna was so agitated tonight. Over the last several weeks—starting around our eighteenth birthday—my twin missed quite a few dinner services, and had snuck in well past sunset, her bronze cheeks flushed and her dark eyes bright. There was something different about her. And I had a strong suspicion it was because of a certain young vendor in the market.

Domenico Nucci Junior.

I’d stolen a peek at her diary and had seen his name scribbled in the margins before guilt had overtaken me and I’d tucked it back

under the floorboard where she'd hidden it. We still shared a room on the second floor of our small, crowded home, so thankfully she didn't notice my snooping.

"Vittoria is fine, Nonna." I handed her some fresh parsley to garnish the shrimp. "I told you she's been flirting with the Nucci boy who sells arancini for his family near the castle. I'm sure he's busy with all the pre-festival celebrations tonight. I bet she's passing out fried rice balls to everyone who's overindulged. They need something to soak up all that sacramental wine." I winked, but my grandmother's fear didn't abate. I set the rest of the parsley down and hugged her close. "No demon is stealing her soul, or eating her heart. I promise. She'll be here soon."

"One day I hope you'll take signs from the goddesses seriously, bambina."

Maybe one day. But I'd heard stories about red-eyed demon princes my whole life and hadn't met one yet. I wasn't too worried things would suddenly change now. Wherever the Wicked had gone, it seemed to be permanent. I feared them as much as I worried about dinosaurs suddenly returning from extinction to take over Palermo. I left Nonna to the scampi, and smiled as music filtered in between the sounds of knives chopping and spoons stirring. It was my favorite kind of symphony—one that allowed me to focus entirely on the joy of creation.

I inhaled the fragrant scent of garlic and butter.

Cooking was magic and music combined. The crack of shells, the hiss of pancetta hitting a hot pan, the metallic clang of a whisk beating the side of a bowl, even the rhythmic thwack of a cleaver against a wooden cutting board. I adored each part of being in a kitchen with my family. I couldn't imagine a more perfect way to spend an evening.

Sea & Vine was my future and it promised to be filled with love and light. Especially if I saved enough coin to purchase the building next door and expand our family business. I'd been experimenting with new flavors from across Italy and wanted to create my own menu one day.

My mother hummed along while forming marzipan into fruit shapes. "He's a nice boy. Domenico. He'd make a good match for Vittoria. His mother is always pleasant."

Nonna tossed a flour-coated hand in the air, waving it around as if the idea of an engagement with a Nucci stunk worse than the streets of the nearby fish market. "Bah! She's too young to worry about marriage. And he's not Sicilian."

My mother and I both shook our heads. I had a feeling his Tuscan roots had little to do with Nonna's disapproval. If she had it her way,

we'd live in our ancestral home—in our little quarter of Palermo—until our bones turned to dust. Nonna didn't believe anyone else could watch over us as well as she could. Especially a mere human boy. Domenico wasn't witch-born like my father, and therefore Nonna didn't think he could ever fully be trusted with our secret.

"He was born here. His mother is from here. I'm fairly certain that makes him Sicilian," I said. "Stop being grumpy. It doesn't suit someone as sweet as you."

She harrumphed, ignoring my blatant attempt to charm her. Stubborn as a mule, as my grandfather would've said. She picked up her carved wooden spoon and pointed it in my direction. "Sardines washed themselves onto the shore. Gulls didn't touch them. You know what that means? It means *they're* no fools. The devil's stirring the seas, and they'll have nothing to do with his offerings."

"Mamma," my mother groaned and set the almond paste down. "A boat carrying kerosene crashed into the rocks last night. The oil killed the fish, not the devil."

Nonna shot my mother a look that would sink lesser souls to their knees. "You know as well as I do it's a sign the Malvagi have arrived, Nicoletta. They've come to collect. You've heard of the bodies. The timing matched what was foretold. Is that a coincidence, too?"

"Bodies?" My voice shot up several octaves. "What are you talking about?"

Nonna clamped her mouth shut. My mother whipped her head around, forgetting about the marzipan again. A look passed between them, so deep and meaningful that chills crept down my spine.

"What bodies?" I prodded. "What was foretold?"

Our restaurant was busier than normal while we prepared for the influx of people attending the festival tomorrow, and it had been days since I'd listened to gossip swirling around the marketplace. I hadn't heard anything about bodies.

My mother gave my grandmother a look that said *You started this, you finish it,* and went back to her candy shaping. Nonna settled onto a chair she kept near the window, clasping her wine tightly. A breeze lifted the oppressive heat. Her eyes fluttered shut, as if soaking it in. She looked exhausted. Whatever was happening, was bad.

"Nonna? Please. What happened?"

"Two girls were murdered last week. One in Sciacca. And one here. In Palermo."

Sciacca—a port town facing the Mediterranean Sea—was almost directly south of us. It was a little jewel on an island filled with visual treasure. I couldn't imagine a murder there. Which was ridiculous since death didn't discriminate between paradise and hell.

"That's awful." I set my knife down, pulse pounding. I looked at

my grandmother. “Were they… human?”

Nonna’s sad look said it all. *Streghe.* I swallowed hard. No wonder she was carrying on about the Wicked returning. She was imagining one of us discarded in the streets, our souls being tortured by demons in Hell while our blood slipped through cracks in the stone, replenishing Earth’s magic. I shuddered despite the sweat beading my brow. I didn’t know what to make of the murders.

Nonna often chided me for being too skeptical, but I still wasn’t convinced the Malvagi were to blame. Old legends claimed the Wicked were sent to make bargains and retrieve souls for the devil, not kill. And no one had seen them wandering our world in at least a hundred years.

Humans murdered each other all the time, though, and they definitely attacked us when they suspected what we were. Whispers of a new band of *strega* hunters reached us last week, but we’d seen no evidence of them. But now… if witches were being murdered, I was more inclined to believe human zealots were to blame. Which meant we needed to be even more careful to avoid discovery. No more simple charms where we could be seen. I tended to be overly cautious, but my sister was not. Her favorite form of hiding was not hiding at all.

Maybe Nonna was right to be worried.

“What did you mean about the Malvagi coming to collect?” I asked. “Or it being foretold?”

Nonna didn’t look happy about my line of questioning, but saw the determination in my eyes and knew I’d keep asking. She sighed. “There are stories that claim the Wicked will return to Sicily every few weeks beginning now, searching for something that was stolen from the devil.”

This was a new legend. “What was stolen?”

My mother stilled before shaping the marzipan again. Nonna sipped her wine carefully, gazing into it as if she might divine the future in the pulp floating on the surface. “A blood debt.”

I raised my brows. That didn’t sound ominous at all. Before I could interrogate her further, someone rapped on the side door where we brought in supplies. Over the chatter in the small dining room, my father called to Uncle Nino to entertain the dinner guests. Footsteps thudded down the hall and the door creaked open.

“*Buonasera,* signore di Carlo. Is Emilia here?”

I recognized the deep voice and knew what he’d come to ask. There was only one reason Antonio Vicenzu Bernardo, the most newly appointed member of the holy brotherhood, ever called on me here. The nearby monastery relied heavily on donations and charity, so once or twice a month I made dinner for them on behalf of our family

restaurant.

Nonna was already shaking her head as I wiped my hands on a towel and set my apron on the island. I smoothed down the front of my dark skirts, cringing a little at the flour splattered across my bodice. I looked like a queen of ash and probably stank like garlic.

I swallowed a sigh. Eighteen and romantically doomed forever.

"Emilia… please."

"Nonna, there are already plenty of people in the streets celebrating before the festival tomorrow. I promise I'll stick to the main road, make dinner quickly, and grab Vittoria on the way back. We'll both be home before you know it."

"No." Nonna was out of her chair, ushering me back like a wayward hen toward the island and my abandoned cutting board. "You mustn't leave here, Emilia. Not tonight." She clutched her own *cornicello,* her expression pleading. "Let someone else donate food instead, or you'll find yourself joining the dead in that monastery."

"Mamma!" my mother scolded. "What a thing to say!"

"Don't worry, Nonna," I said. "I don't plan on dying for a very, very long time."

I kissed my grandmother, then snatched a half-formed piece of marzipan from the plate my mother was working on and popped it into my mouth. While I chewed, I stuffed a basket with tomatoes, fresh basil, homemade mozzarella, garlic, olive oil, and a small bottle of thick balsamic Uncle Nino brought from his recent visit to Modena. It wasn't traditional, but I'd been experimenting and loved the flavor of vinegar lightly drizzled on top.

I added a jar of salt, a loaf of crusty bread we baked earlier, then quickly ducked out of the kitchen before I was wrangled into another argument.

I smiled warmly at Fratello Antonio, hoping he couldn't hear Nonna condemning him and the entire monastery in the background. He was young and handsome for a member of the brotherhood—just three years older than Vittoria and I. His eyes were the color of melted chocolate, and his lips always hinted at the sweetest smile. He'd grown up next door to us, and I used to dream about marrying him one day. Too bad he'd devoted himself to chastity; I was certain half the Kingdom of Italy wouldn't mind kissing his full mouth. Myself included.

"*Buonasera,* Fratello Antonio." I held my basket of supplies aloft, ignoring how odd it felt to call him "brother" when I had some *very* un-sisterly thoughts about him. "I've been experimenting again and am making a sort of a caprese-bruschetta combination for the brotherhood tonight. Does that sound all right?"

For his sake, I hoped so. It was quick and easy, and though the

bread tasted better brushed with olive oil and lightly grilled, it didn't require a fire to make.

"It sounds heavenly, Emilia. And please, Antonio is fine. No need for old friends to stand on ceremony." He gave me a shy nod. "Your hair looks lovely."

"Grazie." I reached up and brushed my fingers against a flower. When we were younger, I began weaving orange blossoms and plumeria in my hair to set my twin and I apart. I reminded myself Antonio was involved with the Almighty Lord now and wasn't flirting with me.

No matter how much I sometimes wished otherwise.

While he studiously ignored the tinny sound of a pot hitting the stone floor, I internally cringed. I could only imagine what Nonna might toss next.

"Most of the brotherhood won't return to the monastery until later," he said, "but I can help, if you'd like."

Nonna's hysterics grew louder. He was polite enough to pretend he didn't hear her dire warnings of demons killing young women in Sicily and stealing their souls. I gave him my most winning smile, hoping it didn't look like a grimace. "I'd like that very much."

His attention slid behind me as Nonna's cries reached us, a tiny crease forming in his brow. Normally she was careful around customers, but if she started screaming about the dark arts and protection charms where he could overhear her, our bustling family restaurant would be ruined.

If there was one thing humans feared as much as the Malvagi, it was witches.

TWO

When we entered the monastery, I wasn't thinking about the devil. Or the wicked, soul-snatching demons Nonna swore were roaming the earth again. And while Antonio was undeniably pleasant to look at, I wasn't distracted by the slight curve of his mouth. Or the flop of brown hair that fell across his brow whenever he glanced at me then quickly looked away.

Of all things, I was thinking about olive oil.

For some reason the corridor smelled faintly of burnt thyme, which made me wonder what thyme-infused olive oil might taste like lightly brushed across crostini. I started daydreaming about my own restaurant again—about the menu I'd perfect. The crostini would make a fantastic antipasto. I'd top the toast off with some sliced mushrooms sautéed with a pad of butter, garlic, and a splash of white wine. Maybe I'd even sprinkle a bit of pecorino and parsley to round out the flavors…

We entered the room where kitchen supplies were kept, and I tucked those thoughts into my mental recipe folder and focused on the task at hand. I removed two cutting boards and a large bowl from the cupboard, and laid everything out on the tiny table.

"I'll dice the tomatoes, you cube the mozzarella."

"As you command, signorina." We both reached inside the basket I'd brought and Antonio's fingers brushed mine. I quickly yanked the tomatoes out and pretended a little thrill hadn't shot through me at the unexpected contact.

Cooking alone with Antonio—in a darkened chamber in a near-forgotten section of the building—was not a bad way to pass the time. If he hadn't turned his life over to the lord, this might have been the beginning of something between us.

Now, unbeknownst to him, we were enemies.

He belonged to the church and I was a witch. And not just a human *strega* using folk magic against the evil eye and praying to Catholic saints. My family was something other, something not entirely human. Our power was feared, not respected. Along with

twelve other witch families living secretly in Palermo, we were true Daughters of the Moon. Descendants of an actual goddess. There were more families scattered across the island, but for everyone's safety, we didn't interact with each other.

Our magic was a peculiar thing. While it only passed down the matriarchal line, it didn't manifest in *all* women. My witch-born mother didn't possess any supernatural abilities. Unless her baking could be counted, which I fully believed it could. Only someone goddess-blessed could craft desserts the way my mother did.

At one time there'd been a council made up of the eldest member of each witch family. Nonna had been the leader in Palermo, but the coven disbanded soon after Vittoria and I were born. Stories were a little murky on the exact cause of the coven's collapse, but from what I'd gathered, old Sofia Santorini had invoked the dark arts and something went very wrong, leaving her mind fragmented. Some said she used a human skull during a scrying session. Others claimed it was a black mirror. All agreed on the end result: her mind was now trapped between realms.

Humans grew suspicious of what they deemed sudden madness. Whispers of the devil followed. Soon our world became too dangerous for real witches to meet, even secretly after that. So the thirteen families of Palermo adopted a strict code of silence and stuck to themselves.

Man had a funny way of blaming the devil for things he didn't like. It was strange that we were called evil when humans were the ones who enjoyed watching us burn.

"So aside from the demons invading our city, how are you?" Antonio didn't even try to hide his grin. "Good thing you've got a member of the holy brotherhood watching out for your trembling soul."

"You're terrible."

"True, but you don't really think so." His dark eyes glittered as I tossed a diced tomato at him, my face flaming. He dodged it with ease. "Or, at least I hope you don't."

"I'll never tell." I dropped my attention to the plump tomato I was dicing. Once, when we were younger, I'd used a truth spell on him to see if he'd returned my feelings. Much to my delight, he had and it felt like the world rejoiced with the discovery. When I told Nonna what I'd done, she made me scrub the kitchen from top to bottom by myself for a month.

It hadn't exactly been the reaction I'd expected.

Nonna said truth spells—while not explicitly part of the dark arts—should never be used on humans because they were part of *Il Proibito*. The Forbidden were few, but held severe consequences.

Free will was one of the most basic laws of nature in this world, beyond notions of light or dark magic, and should *never* be trifled with, which was why truth spells were off-limits. She used old Sofia Santorini as a cautionary tale whenever we questioned her strict rules.

Not every witch in our community shared the same views as Nonna, though. When the coven disbanded, some families—like my friend Claudia's—openly turned to the dark arts. They believed magic was magic and could—and should—be used however a witch wanted to use it. Blood, bones; practitioners of the dark arts said all were viable tools. Vittoria tried using that logic on Nonna when we were fifteen, and ended up being the toilet chambermaid for a solid week.

"Are you planning on sneaking away from the restaurant to celebrate tomorrow?" Antonio finished cubing the mozzarella and dutifully started chopping fresh basil.

"Maybe. It depends on how many customers we have and how late it gets. Honestly, I might just go home and try out some new recipes, or read."

"Ah. Such a pious young woman, reading the Good Book."

"Mmh." I smiled down at my cutting board. The novel I was in the middle of *was* a good book, it just wasn't *the* Good Book. I refrained from telling him about the last chapter I read—the one where the hero expressed his love in many colorful and physically astounding ways. I supposed, technically, his stamina *could* be considered miraculous. I'd certainly become a believer of impossible expectations. "Do you have any fun activities planned with the brotherhood?"

"Fun is subjective. We'll probably be somewhere near the float, doing very serious and holy things."

I didn't doubt that. After Antonio's mother died suddenly last summer, he'd surprised everyone when he left home and started his religious life. Focusing on strict rules helped him grieve. He was doing much better now, and I was glad for him, even if it meant we would never be.

"Here." I handed him the loaf of bread. "You slice this and I'll season the food."

I scraped the diced tomatoes into a bowl and added the mozzarella and basil. A hit of olive oil, some minced garlic, and a pinch of sea salt all followed in rapid succession. Since the bread wasn't toasted and the brotherhood wouldn't be eating right away, I added a tiny bit of my balsamic and stirred everything together. It wasn't exactly the presentation I'd choose, but it was more important for the food to taste good and not let the bread get soggy.

"How was your trip?" I asked. "I heard you had to quell rumors of shape-shifters."

"Ah yes, the heretics who came here from the Friuli district after

the Inquisition are telling some interesting tales. Mighty warriors—whose spirits leave their bodies in animal form—to protect crops from malevolent forces have indeed returned." He snorted. "At least that's the story we were told in the village I was assigned to. They're convinced there's a spirit assembly where a goddess is teaching them ways to protect themselves from evil. It's hard breaking old beliefs." He met my gaze and a world of trouble brewed in his eyes. "Your nonna isn't the only one who thinks demons have arrived."

"I—"

A voice sounded in the corridor, too low to make out words clearly. Antonio held a finger to his lips. Whoever it was spoke again, a little louder. I still couldn't understand what they'd said, but they did not sound friendly. I fumbled for a knife. A hooded figure stepped into the chamber from the shadows, and slowly extended its arms toward us. "Heathen*s-s-s*."

Goose bumps rose like an army of the undead across my body. Nonna's cries of demons were replaced by my true fear of witch hunters. They'd found me. And there was no way I could use magic in front of them, or Antonio, without giving myself away.

I jumped back so quickly, I tripped over my skirts and crashed into the basket of supplies. Silverware clattered to the ground. The bottle of my special balsamic shattered.

Antonio clutched a wooden rosary that had been hidden under his robes, and stepped forward, placing himself between me and the intruder. "In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to be gone, demon."

Suddenly, the figure doubled over and… giggled. Terror stopped coursing through me, and was swiftly replaced with anger. I pushed myself away from the wall and glared. "Vittoria."

My twin stopped laughing and tossed her hood back. "Don't mind me. I'm picturing the expression on your face again, and it's even more hilarious the second time."

Antonio slowly moved away, frowning down at the mess of glass and vinegar. I took a deep breath and silently counted to ten. "That wasn't funny. And you made me break my balsamic."

Vittoria winced at the bits of glass scattered across the floor. "Oh, Emilia. I'm really sorry." She crossed the small room and crushed me against her in a giant hug. "When we get home you can break my favorite white sage and lavender perfume as retribution."

I blew out a long breath. I knew she sincerely meant it; she'd happily hand over her bottle and watch me smash it to bits, but I would never choose revenge. "I'll settle for a glass of the limoncello wine concoction you make instead."

"I'll make an entire pitcher." She kissed each of my cheeks loudly,

then nodded to Antonio. “You’re very intimidating with the whole lord’s command, brother Antonio. If I were a demon, I’m sure I would’ve definitely been banished back to Hell.”

“Next time I’ll brandish holy water. Burn the devil right out of you.”

“Hmm. You might need to bring a jug for that to work, especially if I summon him here.”

He shook his head, then turned to me. “I should be going; the brotherhood needs my help preparing for tomorrow. Don’t worry about the spilled vinegar—I’ll come back later to clean it up. Thank you again for the food, Emilia. After the festival, I’ll be traveling for a little while to dispel more superstitious rumors, but I hope to see you when I return.”

Not two breaths after he left the chamber, my stupid sister started dancing around the room, pretending to passionately kiss what I could only assume was Antonio. “Oh, Emilia. I hope to see you when I return. Preferably naked, in my bed, screaming the lord’s name.”

“Stop that!” I swatted at her, mortified. “He can probably still hear you!”

“Good.” She wiggled her hips suggestively. “Maybe it’ll give him some ideas. It’s not too late for him to leave the brotherhood. There’s no law or decree that says once he’s accepted orders he needs to stay forever. There are *plenty* more interesting ways for a man to find religion. Maybe you can bathe in holy water and show him.”

“You’re impossibly blasphemous.”

“And *you* are cherry red. Why not tell him how you feel? Or maybe you should just kiss him. Judging by the way he looks at you, I doubt he’d mind. Plus, the worst that can happen is he’ll wax poetic on his religious orders, and you’ll have to strangle him with his rosary.”

“Come on, Venus. You’ve had enough matchmaking for one day.”

I grabbed her hand and hurried out of the room, relieved to find the corridor empty.

No Antonio. Or any other member of the holy brotherhood. Thank the goddess. We rushed down the shadowy halls, and didn’t stop running until the monastery was a speck in the night.

From the comfort of our home kitchen, Vittoria gathered blood oranges, limoncello, red wine, and a bottle of prosecco. I watched from the island as she methodically added everything to a pitcher. A cup of this, a splash of that, a few sugared peels—potions and perfumes were where her magic shined brightest, and it often

translated to drinks. It was one of the few times she was entirely serious, and I loved watching her get lost in pure happiness.

My mouth watered as she sliced oranges. This was my favorite drink by far—Vittoria was inspired by sangria, which in recent years had also become quite popular in France and England. Some English families who'd moved to Palermo brought their recipes with them, adding to our already eclectic history. Nonna said the Spanish had actually been influenced by an Ancient Roman spiced wine called hippocras. No matter where it originated, I simply loved the taste of orange juice mixed with the wine and the fizzy bubbles created from the prosecco.

Vittoria dipped a spoon into the mixture, stirred vigorously, then tasted it before pouring a generous glass for me. She swiped the bottle of limoncello and motioned us up the stairs.

"Hurry, Emilia, before anyone wakes up."

"Where were you earlier?" I quietly shut the bedroom door behind us. "Nonna was one step away from using all of our olive oil to see if evil entered Sea & Vine, and probably the rest of the island if she could."

Vittoria collapsed onto her mattress, bottle of limoncello in hand, and grinned. "I was summoning the devil. An ancient book whispered its secrets to me, and I've decided to take him as my husband. I'd invite you to the wedding, but I'm pretty sure the ceremony takes place in Hell."

I gave her a sharp look. If she didn't want to tell me the truth, fine. She could keep her secret romance with Domenico to herself for however long she liked. "You need to stop drawing so much attention to yourself."

"Or else what? The Malvagi will come and steal my soul? Maybe I'll just sell it to them."

"Or else things will end badly for our family. Two girls were murdered last week. Both were witches. Antonio said people in the last town he visited were talking about shape-shifters. Now isn't the time to be joking about the devil. You know how humans get. First it's shape-shifters, then demons, and then it's only a matter of time before witches are targeted."

"I know." Vittoria swallowed hard and looked away. I opened my mouth to ask what she'd been doing at the monastery, but when she turned back around, her gaze sparkled with mischief. "So. Have you had any special wine or spirits lately?"

I let my interrogation go. "Special wine or spirits" was her code for "supernatural witch sense." She often used code to discuss topics we wanted to hide from humans, or nosy grandmothers. I nestled against my pillow and drew my knees up. Before I told my story, I

whispered a spell of silence to cover the sound of our voices. “Well, the other night I dreamed about a ghost…”

“Wait!” Vittoria set her limoncello down and grabbed her diary, pen in hand and ink pot at the ready. “Tell me everything. Every last detail. What did the ghost look like? Did you see any shimmering outline or shadow, or was it more like a thing you sensed? Did it speak to you? When did this happen, right as you fell asleep, or later in the night?”

“It was closer to the morning. I thought I was awake at first.”

I sipped my drink and told her about the strange dream—the disembodied voice whispering too low to hear anything other than what sounded like the nonsensical language of dreams—believing it had only been my overactive imagination at work, and not the first signs of the horror to come.

THREE

I quickly broke down fish carcasses for stock, ignoring the muffled crunch of bones. We were already deep into prepping for dinner service when I realized I'd forgotten my basket at the monastery. Since it was a holy day and crowds were already out en masse, I had to wait until Sea & Vine closed to retrieve my things.

Maybe it was a blessing from the goddess. Since the brotherhood would be out celebrating La Santuzza—the Little Saint—I wouldn't have to worry about seeing Antonio. I *really* didn't want to run into him after Vittoria's mortifying charades last night. She could get away with being bold and brazen, and people adored her for it. Unfortunately, it was a skill I hadn't mastered.

I looked over at my sister who'd been unusually quiet all morning. Something was troubling her. After I told her about my dream last night, she seemed on the verge of confiding in me.

Instead of talking, she'd set her diary aside, turned over on her mattress, and went to sleep. I wondered if she'd gotten into a fight with her secret boyfriend. Maybe she was supposed to meet him in the monastery and he didn't show.

"I know we're going to be busy tonight," Vittoria said suddenly, breaking into my thoughts, "but I need to leave a little early."

Nonna scooted past my mother—who was making espresso to serve with the dessert—and hoisted a wicker basket full of tiny snails up onto the island, and nodded to my twin. "Here. Boil these for the *babbaluci*." She swatted at my twin's hand. "Not for too long. We don't want them turning to rubber."

I raised my brows, waiting for Nonna to forbid my twin from leaving. She said nothing. While Vittoria quickly boiled a few handfuls of snails at a time, Nonna minced garlic and set a pan of olive oil on the fire. Soon we were all in a rhythm, and I pushed whatever was bothering my sister aside in favor of mastering my fish stock. I'd make her tell me everything later.

Vittoria scooped snails out, Nonna added them to the oil and garlic, lightly fried them and finished them off with salt, pepper, and

fresh parsley. She whispered a blessing over the plates, thanking the food for its nourishment and the snails for their sacrifice. It was a small thing, and not necessarily magical, but I swore it made the food taste better.

"Nicoletta?" Nonna called. My mother set her last tray of dessert aside and tossed a cloth over her shoulder. "Bring your brother this bowl of *babbaluci,* and tell him to go outside and give a bite to anyone who looks hungry. It will help with the line."

And it would draw more people into our trattoria. Nonna might not use magic *directly* on customers, but she was skilled in the art of luring humans in by using their own senses. One whiff of the fried garlic would have plenty of hungry patrons gracing our tables.

Once my mother was gone, Nonna pointed her carved wooden spoon at us. "Did you see the sky this morning? It was as red as the devil's blood. Tonight is not a night to be out. Stay in and work on your grimoires—sew dried yarrow inside your skirts. There's plenty to do at home. Are you wearing your amulets?" I pulled mine from under my bodice. Vittoria sighed and did the same. "Good. You haven't taken them off, have you?"

"No, Nonna." I ignored the heaviness of my sister's gaze as it landed on me. I wasn't technically lying. *She'd* taken her amulet off when we were eight—I'd kept mine on. As far as I knew, neither one of us had ever removed them again.

Nonna took a deep breath, seeming pacified. "Thank the goddess for that. You know what would happen otherwise."

"Our world will turn to nightmares and ash." Vittoria held her arms straight out like she was a slow-moving demon and staggered forward. "The devil will roam free. We will be bathed in the blood of innocents, our souls cursed to Hell for eternity."

"You shouldn't irk the goddesses who've sent signs, Vittoria. Those amulets could set the demon princes free. Unless you'd like to be responsible for the Malvagi entering this realm after La Prima locked them away, I'd heed the warnings."

Any bits of lingering humor left my sister's face. She turned back to the next batch of snails, and gripped her *cornicello* tightly. I swallowed hard, recalling the hellhound we'd heard that night so long ago. Nonna had to be wrong—her warning was more superstition. The devil and his entire demon realm was imprisoned. Plus, Nonna always said our amulets couldn't be brought *together*. I hadn't let them touch—I'd just held my sister's while still wearing mine. The princes of Hell were where they belonged. No demons were roaming Earth. All was well.

Still, when our grandmother's back was turned, Vittoria and I shared a long, silent look.

FOUR

I stared at the dark monastery, unable to shake the feeling that it was staring back, its fangs bared in a vicious sneer. Which was a sign Nonna's superstitions had managed to unnerve me after all. Unless a powerful witch had cast an unheard-of spell to animate limestone and glass, it was only an empty building.

"*Grazie,* Nonna," I said under my breath, not really feeling thankful at all.

I headed for a wooden door set deep within shadows. Thick iron hinges groaned in protest as I slipped inside. Somewhere in the rafters above, a bird took flight—its wings beating in time with my heart.

The Capuchin Monastery was less than a mile from our restaurant and was one of the most beloved buildings in Palermo. Not due to its architecture, but because of the catacombs located within its holy walls. I liked it well enough during daylight, but couldn't shake the chill clinging to me in the dark. Now that it was completely empty, an eerie premonition crawled over my senses. Even the air felt strained—like it was holding its breath from some wicked discovery.

Nonna's cries of demons continued to haunt me as I crept deeper inside the silent monastery, and steeled myself against a growing sense of dread. I *really* didn't want to think about red-eyed, soul-stealing monsters invading our city, especially while I was alone.

I hugged my arms to my chest and walked briskly down a darkened corridor lined with mummies. They'd been posed in standing positions, dressed in garments of their choosing, their clothing dating back hundreds of years.

I tried not to notice their empty, lifeless stares as I hurried along. It was the quickest way to the room where I'd left my basket, and I cursed the brotherhood for the creepy layout.

Though it never bothered my sister. When we were younger, Vittoria wanted to wash and prepare the bodies of the deceased. Nonna didn't approve of her fascination with the dead, and thought it might lead to an obsession with *le arti oscure.* I was torn on the subject, but it didn't matter in the end; the brotherhood chose our

friend Claudia for that task.

On rare afternoons when we all weren't working and could walk along the beach, picking shells for Moon Blessings, Claudia shared stories of how the mummies came to be. I'd squirm my toes in the warm sand, trying to banish goose bumps, but Vittoria would lean forward, a hungry gleam in her eyes, ravenous for every morsel of information Claudia served us.

I did my best to forget those morbid stories now.

A window was cracked open high above, allowing a gusty breeze to barrel through the corridor. It smelled of turned earth and salt—like a storm was blowing in. *Fantastico*. The last thing I needed was to get stuck running home in the rain.

I moved swiftly through the darkness. One torch was lit at each end of the long corridor, leaving much of my path in shadow. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed movement and froze. *I'd* stopped walking, but the sound of cloth brushing against stone continued a good breath or so before falling silent, too. Someone or some*thing* was here.

My entire body buzzed with nerves. I shook my head. I was already scared about the Malvagi and my mind was playing tricks on me. It was probably Vittoria again. I gathered what little bravado I could muster and forced myself to turn around, scanning the corridor of silent, watchful mummies for my sister.

"Vittoria?" I stared into the shadows, and almost screamed when one formed a denser silhouette that rose from behind the bodies. "Who's there?"

Whatever it was, it didn't answer. I thought about the rumors Antonio mentioned yesterday, and couldn't stop picturing a shape-shifter hiding in the dark. Little hairs on my arms stood on end. I *swore* I felt eyes on me. Tiny bells of warning sounded in my head. Danger lurked nearby. Nonna was right—tonight was no night to be out. I was contemplating how quickly I could dash back outside when wings flapped in the rafters. I blew out a breath. There was no apparition, or mythological shape-shifter, or demon stalking me. Just a lost little bird. I probably frightened it more than it scared me.

I slowly backed down the corridor and made my way to the next chamber, ignoring the jitters claiming my bones. I hurried into the room where I'd forgotten my basket and snatched it up, shoving my supplies back in, hands shaking the whole time.

"Stupid bird."

The faster I gathered my things, the faster I could get Vittoria from the festival and go home. Then we'd *borrow* a bottle of wine and crawl into bed, drinking and laughing together over Nonna's dire proclamations about the devil, warm and snug in the safety of our

room.

A scraping of a boot against stone had me frozen in place. There was no mistaking that sound for the wings of a bird. I stood there, barely breathing, listening to an all-consuming silence. I reached for my *cornicello* in comfort.

Then, something quietly began calling me. Slow and insistent; a silent buzzing I couldn't push aside. Goddess knows I was trying. It wasn't a strictly physical sound, more like a peculiar feeling in the pit of my stomach. Each time I considered running away, it grew more demanding.

I gripped the knife from my basket in my other hand and tiptoed down the corridor, pausing to listen at each chamber. My heart pounded with each step. I was half-convinced it might stop working altogether if I didn't calm down.

I took another step, followed by another. Each one more difficult than the last. I strained against the drumming of my pulse, but no other sounds emerged from the darkness. It was as if I'd conjured the earlier noise from fear. But that *feeling*…

I followed it farther into the monastery.

At the very end of the next corridor I halted outside a room with its door ajar. Whatever had been calling me led inside; I felt it. A slight tug in my center, a summoning I had no hope of fighting. I didn't know what sort of magic was at play, but clearly sensed it.

I dropped my amulet and held my breath as I slipped in unseen, wary of what drew me. Nonna always scolded my ability to sneak around undetected, but, at present, it felt more like a blessing than a curse.

Inside, traces of thyme mixed with something metallic and some burnt paraffin wafted around. It took a moment for my vision to adjust, but once it did, I bit down on a gasp, wondering how I'd missed him. Perhaps his preternatural stillness was to blame.

Now that I was aware of his presence, I couldn't drag my gaze away. It was too dark to make out his features clearly, but his hair was a shade close to onyx, almost iridescent like the wings of a raven catching sunlight. He was tall and powerfully built, like a statue of a Roman warrior, though his clothes were that of a fine gentleman.

There was something about him that made me cling to the shadows, though, uneasy about detection.

He loomed over a shrouded body. My mind churned with a dozen stories. Perhaps the love of his life died tragically before they could live out their dreams together, and he was angry with the world. Maybe she passed away peacefully in her sleep. Or maybe she was the murdered witch Nonna mentioned yesterday.

The one whose body was discovered in our city.

That thought was like a pail of ice water being poured over me. I stopped playing out mental fantasies and focused harder on the chamber. A strange assortment of half-blown-out candles were carefully placed in a circle around the stone altar where the body lay. Fragrant wisps of thyme wafted over to me again.

Odd for a human man to set up candles and burn herbs. I recalled the scent of thyme last night, and wondered if he'd been here while Antonio and I were cooking a few chambers down.

I stared at him, pulse thrumming, trying to determine if he was the source of magic that originally caught my attention. I didn't think so. There was no pull to him, only this chamber. Without warning, the air pressure suddenly felt wrong—like there was some distortion occurring in the space around us. Even the shadows seemed to bow in acquiescence.

Right. It was a ludicrous thought. First, invisible ghost demons were following me through the corridors, and now this. There was nothing menacing about a young man saying good-bye to the girl he loved. Placing candles around a body wasn't so strange, either. Plenty of people lit them while praying to their god. Once again, my—

He suddenly bent toward the body, his hands skimming the area above her heart, and I waited for him to tug the shroud away and kiss his beloved good-bye one final time. When he removed his hand from beneath the cloth, his fingers were coated in blood. Slowly, as if in some devil's trance, he brought those fingers to his mouth and *licked* them. For a moment, I stared, unable to process what I'd seen.

Everything inside me buzzed and went immobile. Fear and rage swirled together in a cacophony as I finally understood my earlier innate sense of wrongness.

Warnings rang through me, screeching about bloodthirsty demons, but I was incensed beyond reason. This wasn't a midnight creature, born of darkness and moonlight like Nonna claimed. This all too human monster had broken into the catacombs and committed the vilest of acts; he tasted the blood of the dead. Before I could heed the warnings my grandmother had beaten into our thick skulls from birth, I was out of my hiding spot, screaming like *I* was a feral creature of the night.

"Stop!"

Either from the raw command in my voice, or more likely the ear-splitting shrillness of it, the stranger jumped back a few feet, his movement almost too fast to detect. There was something else odd… something… I grabbed my *cornicello* and concentrated on his aura; his *luccicare* wasn't lavender, but a shimmering, multitoned black with specks of gold. It reminded me of Nonna's titanium quartz. I'd never seen anything like it before.

He glanced from the kitchen knife I held to the body lying on the table, probably debating his next move. For the first time, I noticed the dagger in his hand. A gold snake with lavender eyes twined around its hilt, fangs bared. It was beautiful. Wicked. Deadly.

For a moment, I thought he'd aim it straight at my heart.

"Stay away from her," I warned, taking a small step in his direction, "or I'll scream loud enough to summon every *fratello* in this building."

It was a lie. The whole brotherhood was out doing their duties for Santa Rosalia. As far as I knew, he and I were the only ones in the entire monastery. Deep as we were within the catacombs, no one would hear my screams if he lunged for me. But I wasn't defenseless.

My hand dropped from my amulet and moved toward the moon-blessed chalk Nonna insisted we carry in our secret skirt pockets, ready to fall to my knees and draw a protection circle. It would work against a human just as well as it would protect against any supernatural threat. I hesitated just in case he was a witch hunter and using magic gave my secret away.

He opened his mouth about to say—whatever it was a person said after they were caught licking blood from the dead—when his gaze landed on the area near my chest. The heat of his focus almost singed my dress off. He'd tasted blood then had the nerve to stare at me like I was another delicacy put on this earth for his pleasure alone. Or was that…

"Liar." His voice was deep, rough, and elegant at once. A serrated blade wrapped in silk. All the hair on my arms rose.

Before I unleashed a torrent of curses, he did the last thing I expected; he turned on his heel and fled. In his haste to leave, his serpent dagger clattered to the floor. He either didn't notice or didn't care. I waited, kitchen knife pointed in front of me, breathing hard. I didn't hear retreating footsteps, only a slight crackle like fire. There and gone too quickly to be sure.

If he charged from the shadows, I'd defend myself through any means necessary. No matter if the thought made me queasy. Another moment passed. Then another. I strained against the loud roaring of my pulse, listening for any signs of footsteps.

There was no sound aside from my frantic heartbeat.

He didn't return. I contemplated chasing him, but found neither my breath nor my shaking legs were cooperating. I glanced down, wondering what had made him appear so uneasy, and saw my *cornicello* glinting in the darkness. How—

The silent calling was back in force, urging me to listen closely. I shoved the whispers into the deepest recesses of my mind. I didn't need any more distractions. It took a few moments of slowing my

pulse to realize the body on the table wasn't where the brotherhood brought new corpses to be washed and prepared for mummification.

In fact, this room didn't appear to be used for anything. My attention drifted around the chamber, noticing a thick layer of dust. Aside from the stone altar set in the middle, it was a small room carved from limestone. There were no shelves or crates or storage. It smelled of mold and stale air, as if it had been sealed off for hundreds of years and had only recently been opened. The must was a much stronger scent than the earlier faint aroma of thyme.

An uncomfortable prickle began at the top of my spine and worked its way to my toes. Now that the stranger was gone, there was no doubt the body was calling me. Which was never a positive sign. I hadn't had the pleasure of speaking with the dead before and didn't really find the thought all too appealing now. I wanted to run away and definitely *not* peer under the shroud, but couldn't.

I gripped my knife and forced myself to walk over to the corpse, obeying that silent, insistent tug, cursing my conscience the whole way. Before I looked at the body, I snatched the stranger's dagger from the ground, replacing my flimsy kitchen knife with it. Its heft was a small comfort. If the blood-drinking deviant returned, I had a much better weapon to threaten him with.

Feeling as comforted as I could, I turned to the covered body, finally giving in to its summoning. I permitted no fear to enter my heart as I wrenched the shroud back from its face.

I was silent for an entire breath before my scream shattered the tranquility of the monastery.

FIVE

Magic is a living, breathing entity; it thrives on the energy you give it. Like all forces of nature, it is neither good nor bad—it simply becomes based on the user's intent. Feed it love and it blossoms and grows. Nourish it with hate and it will deliver hate back to you tenfold.

—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire

The face I stared into was a mirror of my own. Brown eyes, dark brown hair, olive skin bronzed by both the sun and our shared ancestry. I reached over, tentatively brushing a strand of hair off Vittoria's brow, and yanked my hand back at the warmth that still lingered.

"Vittoria? Can you move?"

Her eyes were fixed and empty. I waited for her to blink, then wheeze with laughter. She never suppressed her giggles for long.

Vittoria didn't move. I didn't inhale or exhale, either. I stood there, looking down at her, caught somewhere between denial and terror. I could not make myself understand the sight before me. I tugged at my hair. I'd seen her just an hour or two earlier.

This had to be another one of her stupid pranks.

"Vittoria?" I whispered, hoping for a response. Seconds stretched into minutes. She stared, unblinking. Maybe she was unconscious. I reached over and shook her a little. "Please. Move."

Even with her eyes open, she looked so peaceful, lying with a shroud tucked up under her chin. Like she was in a deep enchanted trance and a prince would soon come and kiss her awake. Something twisted deep inside me. This was no fairy tale. No one coming to break the spell of death. But *I* should have been here to rescue my sister.

If I'd only left the restaurant sooner, maybe I could've done something to save her. Maybe that murdering beast would've taken me instead. Or maybe I should've insisted that she listen to Nonna and stay in. I could have told our grandmother about the amulets. There

were a hundred different choices laid out before me, and I'd done nothing. Maybe if… I closed my eyes against the rush of darkness surging through me.

Which was worse.

This had to be another horribly vivid fantasy I created—there was no way this was real. And yet, when I opened my eyes again, there was no denying that Vittoria was dead.

A steady drip broke into my thoughts. It seemed so strange, so mundane a noise. And yet I focused on it intently. It helped to drown out the insistent buzzing and whispering I could still hear.

Maybe madness was creeping in.

The drip slowed. It meant something—the absence of it. I couldn't think of it now. The strange whispering finally grew too quiet to hear. Like whatever had caused it had moved far away.

A sob broke the growing silence. It took a moment to realize it came from me.

The chamber spun until I nearly collapsed. My twin. My best friend. *Gone*. We'd never drink or laugh or plan our future. She'd never mock Nonna's superstitions or jump out from the shadows again. We'd never fight or make up. She'd never push me to be bolder, or tell me to grab my dreams by the throat. I didn't know who to be without her. How to go on.

"No." I shook my head, refusing to accept it. There was magic and trickery at play. Vittoria couldn't be dead. She was young and vibrant and so full of *life*. Vittoria danced the hardest at festivals, praised the moon and the goddess of night and stars the loudest, and always made everyone feel like her very best friend. I didn't know who this still, silent person was.

Through my tears I pulled the shroud completely off. The dress she wore was white, like an offering. It was finely made silk accented by lace. I'd never seen it. We weren't poor, but we certainly couldn't purchase something like that. Not unless she'd been saving for the last few summers.

The delicate bodice, destroyed, her *cornicello* missing, her—

I screamed. Her heart had been ripped from her chest. The hole jagged and angry. It was a gaping black and crimson chasm in her body, so unnatural I knew if I lived a thousand years, I'd never erase the sight of it from my memory. I stared at the blood, finally understanding the source of the incessant dripping. It pooled under her body and splattered down the altar.

There was so much blood. It looked—I fell to my knees, heaving up everything in my stomach. I retched again and again until there was nothing left.

I closed my eyes and the image there was even more terrible.

I dragged in breath after breath, but it didn't help the dizziness. Now that I'd seen the blood, all I could smell was the metallic scent of death. It was everywhere, permeating everything. I went hot and cold in flashes.

I slipped forward and splayed across the stone. I tried pushing myself up and fell again. I was covered in my twin's blood. I curled onto my side and trembled. This was a nightmare. I'd wake soon. I'd wake soon, I had to. Nightmares didn't last forever. I just had to make it through the night.

Then everything would be okay.

I'm not sure how long I stayed there, shaking and sobbing on the floor, but at least an hour or two had passed. Maybe more. I needed to get help.

Not that anyone could save Vittoria now.

With weak arms, I finally pushed myself back up and stared at my sister, unable to reconcile the truth before me.

Murdered.

The word clanged through me like a death knell. Fear cleaved through my despair. My sister had been murdered. I needed to get help. I needed to find safety. I needed to—I dragged the stranger's blade across my palm and held my bleeding hand over my sister's body.

"I swear on my life, I will make whoever did this pay, Vittoria."

I looked at her one last time, then ran like the devil was coming for my cursed soul next.

SIX

Revelers jostled into me, splashing cups of wine down their tunics and dresses, laughing and trying to swing me into a dance. To indulge in their merriment. To celebrate the victory of life over death their blessed saint brought them all those years ago.

In a daze, I walked past our darkened restaurant, long since closed for the night, and found my way into our neighborhood. The hem of my skirts was soaked from goddess knew what. The material clung to my ankles and itched like mad. I kept moving, ignoring any discomfort. I had no right to feel anything when my sister would never feel again.

"Little witch all alone."

It was no louder than a hiss, but the voice sent a violent shudder down my spine. I spun on my heel, and stared into an empty street. "Who's there?"

"Memories, like hearts, can be stolen."

The voice was behind me now. I jerked around, heart racing, and saw… nothing.

"This isn't real," I whispered. My mind was just taunting me with horrific things after finding my sister's mutilated body. It seemed my invisible ghost demon had found a voice—a thought so ridiculous I couldn't even entertain it as truth. "Go away."

"He wishes to remember, but only forgets. He's coming here soon."

"Who is? The man who did this to Vittoria?"

I pivoted, skirts twisting around me. Not a single living thing was in the street. In fact, it seemed eerily still—like someone had snuffed out all life. No lights were on inside homes. No movement or noise. I couldn't hear the bustle and excitement of the festival, either.

Thick unnatural fog crept along the ground and curled around my feet, bringing with it the scent of sulfur and ash. Nonna would claim it was a sign demons were near. I wondered if some murdering human was hiding in the shadows, waiting with a knife.

"Who's coming?" I demanded, feeling more and more like I was

trapped in some terrible nightmare. I closed my eyes and forced myself to snap into reality. I couldn't fall apart now. "When I open my eyes again, everything will be normal."

And it was. There was no sulfuric fog, sounds of families sitting down together floated through open windows, and jeers of drunken festivalgoers echoed all around.

I rubbed my arms and hurried toward my house. Ghostly demons. Disembodied voices. Devilish fog. I knew exactly what was going on—I was suffering from hysterics. And now was *not* the time. Vittoria's body needed to come home for death rites. I could hide my own despair and delusions away long enough to do that much for her.

After a few more minutes of mindlessly pushing forward down familiar streets, I stood outside our stone house and paused under the trellis covered with plumeria, unable to formulate the words I needed to say. I had no idea how to deliver the news to my family.

In moments they'd all feel like they'd been beaten and broken, too.

From here on out, our lives would never be the same again. I imagined my mother's scream. My father's tears. The horror in Nonna's face, knowing all her preparations to save us from evil had been pointless.

Vittoria was dead.

I must have cried out or made some small noise. A swath of golden light cut through the darkness before fading as quickly. Nonna was at the window, waiting. She'd likely been there since she came home. Worrying and fretting. Her warnings about the devil stirring the seas, and the sky being the color of his blood didn't seem like silly old superstition now.

The door swung open before I finished climbing the steps carved into the front of our home and reached the knob.

Nonna started shaking her head, her eyes watering, as she grabbed her *cornicello*. I didn't have to say anything. The blood staining my hands said enough. "No." Her bottom lip quivered. I'd never seen such despair and undulated fear in Nonna's face before. "No. It can't be."

The hollowness inside me spread. All her lessons, all of our charms… for nothing.

"Vittoria is…" I swallowed hard, the action nearly choking me. "She's…"

I stared down at the serpent dagger I still held, but had no memory of taking. I wondered if it was the weapon that had taken my sister's life. My grip on it tightened.

Nonna took one look at the dagger and wrapped me in her arms, holding me fiercely against her. "What happened, bambina?"

I buried my face in her shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of spices and herbs. Hugging Nonna made everything real. The whole goddessless nightmare.

"Your worst fears."

Flashes of my twin and her missing heart crossed my mind, and whatever thread of strength I'd been clutching to snapped, plunging me into darkness.

The day after we laid my sister to rest, I sat alone in our room, an unopened book in my lap. It was so quiet. I used to cherish peaceful days like this, when my twin was out being adventurous and I was adventuring with a favorite character. A good book was its own brand of magic, one I could safely indulge in without fear of getting caught by those who hunted us. I loved escaping from reality, especially during times of trouble. Stories made everything possible.

My attention moved to the door the same way it had all morning, searching for a sign Vittoria was about to charge through it, her face flushed and her grin wide. All remained still.

Downstairs a spoon clinked against the cast iron cauldron. A moment later herbal scents wafted up. Nonna had been making spell candles nonstop. She lit them for the *polizia,* helping to guide them in their search. Or so she claimed. I'd seen the juniper berry and belladonna candle she'd made with a dash of salt and a pinch of pepper. It was her own recipe and it wasn't used for clarity.

I set my book aside and went downstairs, hovering near the edge of the kitchen. Not quite hungry, but feeling empty, hollow. I hadn't felt like cooking or creating, and couldn't imagine ever feeling that light and free again. Living in a world without my sister felt dark and wrong.

Nonna glanced up. "Come sit, Emilia. I'll make you something to eat."

"That's all right, Nonna. I can fix something."

I went to the ice box and almost burst into tears when I saw the pitcher of limoncello wine Vittoria had made for me. No one had touched it.

I quickly shut the door, and perched on the edge of the closest stool.

"Here." Nonna set a bowl of sweetened ricotta in front of me, her expression kind. "Desserts always go down easy."

I pushed the creamy concoction around. "Do you think someone found out… what we are? Maybe Vittoria joked about the devil or demons to the wrong human."

“No, bambina. I don’t believe it was a human who attacked her at all. Not with the signs we’ve been receiving. Or the blood debt.”

I’d forgotten all about the mysterious blood debt. It seemed an entire lifetime had passed since Nonna first mentioned it. “You believe the blood debt is responsible for Vittoria’s murder?”

“Mmh. It was part of an ancient bargain struck between La Prima and the devil. Some believe La Prima cursed the Wicked, others believe the devil cursed witches. A warning came one day: ‘When witch blood spills across Sicily, take your daughters and hide. The Malvagi have arrived.’ Now there’s been three witch murders.”

“It doesn’t mean the Wicked killed them. What about witch hunters? Don’t you think that sounds more logical than demon royalty breaking out of Hell? You know as well as I do how much humans fear witches, and how willing they are to commit the very sins they accuse us of. In fact, Antonio said a village not far from here is convinced shape-shifters have been cavorting with a goddess. Maybe someone like that saw Vittoria whisper a charm and killed her.”

“The devil stirred the seas and made the sky bleed. What more will convince you that danger is knocking at our door that has nothing to do with mortals? What use do humans have with witch hearts?”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the anger building inside me. This wasn’t the time to believe stories passed down from generations ago. Now was the time to consider the facts that made the most sense. Starting with the first victim in Sciacca—more than a week before Vittoria’s murder—not a single witch family had come forward with information about the Wicked’s arrival. Until new evidence or proof was uncovered about the demon princes, I’d stick with my theory of a human being responsible.

“Are we going to speak with the police, Nonna?”

“If they investigate too closely and discover what we are, do you think your fate will be any different than your sister’s?”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to fight with my grandma. I also couldn’t quite figure out a way to tell the police witch hunters might be to blame without casting suspicion on us.

I was so frustrated, I could scream. My twin had been murdered. No one who knew my sister would ever wish her harm. Which meant it *had* to be a stranger, or someone who’d figured out what she was. According to Nonna, the other two victims were also witches. That wasn’t a mere coincidence—it was a connection. A woman with a little power was terrifying to some.

I curled my hands into fists, focusing on the pain of my nails sinking into my skin. Someone chose to hurt Vittoria. And I wanted to know who. *Why*.

What had Vittoria been doing in the hours leading up to the

attack? She didn't usually visit the monastery, but I'd seen her there twice in as many days.

It was possible she was meeting that strange dark-haired man there. For what purpose, I wasn't sure. She could have been secretly involved with him. Or maybe the murderer dragged her there against her will. Maybe she didn't know him at all and he'd intercepted her while she'd been on her way elsewhere.

I couldn't recall exactly what time she'd left Sea & Vine. That day had started off like any other—we'd gotten up, dressed, shared a morning meal, and went to work with our family to prep for the busy festival day.

I hadn't even asked where she was going. I didn't know she wouldn't ever return.

Tears threatened, but I held them in. If I could go back in time, I'd do so many things differently. I shoved the heels of my hands into my eyes, and commanded myself to keep it together.

"It's not easy for any of us, Emilia," Nonna said. "Let this go. Let the goddesses take their vengeance in their own way. The First Witch won't allow things to continue like this—trust that she has a plan for the Malvagi, and work on your protection charms. Your family needs you."

"I can't sit here while the person who killed her walks free. Please don't ask me to trust in a witch I've never met, or in goddesses I'm not sure really exist. Vittoria deserves justice."

Nonna cupped my face, her eyes watering. "You must put this to rest for your family. Nothing good will come from knocking on doors best left closed. Find forgiveness and acceptance in your heart, or darkness will seep in and destroy you."

I excused myself and went back upstairs. I needed to be alone with my thoughts. I dropped onto my bed, haunted with memories of that cursed chamber where I'd found Vittoria.

I'd gone over it again and again in excruciating detail, trying to figure out what brought my sister there. I was missing something vital. Something that might help find Vittoria's killer.

I closed my eyes and concentrated as hard as I could, pretending I was standing in that room again with her body. I kept thinking about how she was dressed. I had no idea where she'd gotten the white gown. She wasn't wearing it the last time I saw her. Which begged the question of what she'd been doing that afternoon. Was she secretly about to marry Domenico? Or had she planned something else?

Then there was the mystery of her missing *cornicello*. Nonna told us to never take off our amulets and apart from that one time when we were eight, we never did. Or at least I never did again. Maybe my sister had, but I couldn't fathom why. We didn't have to see or even

fully believe in the Wicked to fear them. Nonna's stories were terrifying enough. Vittoria joked about Nonna's superstitions, but she was out digging up grave dirt, swiping vials of holy water, and blessing our amulets by the light of a full moon each month right along with me.

I rolled onto my side, contemplating the most troubling questions of all; if she hadn't taken her protection amulet off, who did and where was it now?

If a witch hunter discovered who she was, it was possible he took it as a prize. Maybe he suspected it was an actual magical object, unlike other human-made amulets. My thoughts turned to that dark-haired stranger again. Dressed in such fine clothes, he certainly wasn't a member of the holy brotherhood. And he didn't look like the sort to turn his life over to God. He seemed too defiant for religion. I hadn't met a witch hunter before, so I couldn't rule that out. Maybe he was a thief—he'd certainly moved around the shadows with ease.

I cursed myself for not chasing after him when I had the chance. When he fled, he took all of my answers with him. Except things weren't entirely hopeless. I sat up, heart racing, and yanked open the drawer on my nightstand. Metal glinted in the light. He'd made one giant mistake; he'd dropped his dagger. Surely someone, somewhere would recognize such a unique blade.

My thoughts settled. That was it, then. I had something to focus on aside from falling apart and reliving that night over and over.

I took a few deeps breaths, steeling myself against the next wave of tears and vowed—one way or another—to find the mysterious stranger and discover exactly who he was, what he was doing, and how he knew my sister.

And if he was the person who'd stolen her from me, I'd make him pay with his own life.

SEVEN

No matter how hard I dug my heels in and tried to halt time, three weeks passed since we'd buried my sister. Three weeks of lying in her bed in our shared room, crying into the sheets that were slowly fading with her lavender and white sage scent.

On good days I came downstairs and sat before the fire in our kitchen, staring into the flames. I imagined myself burning. Not like our ancestors at the stake. An ember of anger was slowly igniting within me, reducing the person I used to be to ash.

At times my simmering rage was the only indication I was still alive.

After dinner service tonight, Nonna kept casting wary glances my way, muttering charms of good health and well-being while scouring our family grimoire. She didn't understand the hatred I was being consumed with. Didn't see how I longed for revenge.

Vengeance was now a part of me, as real and necessary as my heart or my lungs. During the day I was a dutiful daughter, but once night fell, I scoured the streets, spurred on by a singular need to set right a terrible wrong. I hadn't found anyone who knew the mysterious stranger or recognized his deadly blade, and I wondered if they just didn't *want* to admit anything for fear of retribution. Each day that passed fueled my growing wrath.

That dark-haired man had answers I needed. And I was losing what little patience I had. I'd started praying to the goddess of death and fury, making all sorts of promises if she'd help me find him.

So far, the goddess couldn't be bothered.

"*Buonasera,* Nonna." I set my satchel of knives on the kitchen counter in our home and dropped onto a stool. My parents insisted I spend a few hours in the restaurant each day. We could only afford to close Sea & Vine for a week to mourn Vittoria. Then, whether any of us liked it or not, life resumed. My mother still cried as often as I did and my father wasn't doing much better. But they pretended to be strong for me. If they could try, the least I could do was trudge into the restaurant and slice some vegetables before collapsing back into

my grief.

"Emilia, hand me the beeswax and dried petals."

I found a few squares of wax and a tiny bundle of dried flowers on the sideboard. Nonna was making spell candles, and judging from the colors—white, gold, and pale purple—she was working a few different charms. Some for clairvoyance, some for luck, and some for peace.

None of us had had much peace this month. The *polizia* tied my sister's murder to the two other girls. Apparently they also had their hearts ripped out, but there were no suspects or leads. They swore it wasn't for a lack of effort on their part. But after the initial meetings, they stopped coming by our home and restaurant. They stopped asking questions. Young women died. Life resumed. Such was the way of the world, at least according to men.

No one cared that Vittoria had been slaughtered like an animal. Some more-vicious gossips even hinted that she must have deserved it. She'd somehow asked for it by being too bold, or confident, or ungodly. If she'd only been a little quieter, or more subservient, she might have been spared. As if anyone deserved to be murdered.

My family almost seemed relieved when talk shifted to new scandals. They wanted to mourn and fade into the shadows again, hoping to escape scrutiny from neighbors and police.

Nosy vendors from the marketplace came to our restaurant, ate at our tables, hoping for news, but my family was too practiced with secret-keeping to give anything away.

"Claudia stopped by," Nonna said, breaking into my endless worries. "Again."

I sighed. I imagined my friend was desperate if she braved speaking with Nonna. Because Claudia's family practiced the dark arts, and because we were not supposed to associate with other witches for safety reasons, our lifelong friendship was a source of tension for each of our families. It was a rotten thing to do, but I'd been avoiding her, not ready to share our tears and grief just yet. "I'll visit her soon."

"Mmh."

I watched the cauldron Nonna hung over the fire in our kitchen, breathing in the herbal mixture. I used to love when she infused her own oils. Now I could hardly sit through the process without thinking of my sister, and the times she'd beg Nonna to make special soap or cream.

Vittoria loved crafting perfume as much as I adored blending ingredients into sauces. She used to sit where I was, head bent over secret potions, tinkering until she got the scent right. A bit of floral notes, a touch of citrus, and she always included an undertone of something spicy to balance it out. She'd whoop with delight and make

us all wear her latest creation until we were sick of it. One fall, she made everything out of blood orange, cinnamon, and pomegranate and I swore I'd never so much as *look* at any of them again. The memories were too much…

I pushed away from the island and kissed my grandmother. "Good night."

Nonna inhaled deeply, like she wanted to impart some wisdom or comfort, but gave me a sad smile instead. "*Buona notte,* bambina. Sleep well."

I climbed the stairs, dreading the silent empty room that was once filled with so much joy and laughter. For a second, I considered torturing myself with watching Nonna make spell candles again, but grief weighted my eyelids and tugged at my heart.

I slipped out of my muslin dress and into a thin nightgown, trying not to remember that Vittoria had the same one. Except where my ribbons were ice blue, hers were pale pink. The air was thick with summer heat, promising another restless night of tossing and turning.

I padded barefoot across the floor and pushed the window up.

I stared out across the rooftops, wondering if Vittoria's murderer was out there now, stalking another girl. Nearby, I swore a wolf howled. A singular, mournful note hung in the air, sending a shudder down my spine.

In my haste to get into bed, I knocked over a glass of water. Liquid ran over a spot I'd forgotten about. It was a place in the floorboards where Vittoria hid things. Little trinkets like dried flowers, notes from the latest boy who loved her, her diary, and perfume she'd made.

I rushed across the room, dropped to my knees, and almost broke my fingernails as I pried the board up. Inside were all the objects I remembered.

Plus a gambling chip with a crowned frog on one side, and two thick sheets of black parchment tied with matching string. I blotted them on my nightgown, hoping I hadn't ruined this precious piece of my twin. My hands trembled as I unrolled them. Gold roots edged the border, the ink shiny against the darkness of the oversized page. They were spells torn from a grimoire I'd never seen. I scanned the script, but couldn't quite identify what it was used for. It listed herbs and specific colored candles and instructions in Latin. I pushed the sheets aside and pulled her diary into my lap.

I was willing to bet my own soul that this was the key to unlocking what she'd been doing—and who she'd mistakenly trusted—in the days and weeks leading up to her death.

I ran my fingers across the scarred leather. Holding her diary made me ache with memories. At night she'd write in it constantly,

recording everything from each of my strange dreams, to Claudia's scrying sessions, notes about her perfumes, spells and charms, and recipes for new drinks. I had no doubt she also told this diary each secret she'd been keeping from me.

All I had to do was crack the spine, and I'd discover everything I needed to know.

I hesitated. These were her private thoughts, and I didn't want to commit one more violation when she'd already suffered so much. I sat quietly, considering what she would urge me to do. I easily heard her voice in my head, telling me to stop thinking about the fall and to just jump. Vittoria took risks. She made hard choices, especially if it meant helping her family.

In order to find out who killed her, I needed to follow in her footsteps, even if it made me uncomfortable. I inhaled deeply, and opened the diary.

Or I would have, if the pages weren't stuck together.

I pulled a little harder, not wanting to destroy it, but worried the water had somehow damaged it. The book didn't budge. I yanked it with all of my strength. It didn't even bend. I scooted over to the wall, placed my feet on the lip of the back cover and my fingers along the front and tried prying it, and… nothing. A dark suspicion took shape.

I whispered a spell of unveiling, and tossed a pinch of salt over my shoulder for luck with deciphering the enchantment. Faint spiderwebbing in a violet-blue hue rose around the diary like a tangle of thorny vines. My sister had spelled it shut using magic I'd never seen before.

Which meant she'd known *exactly* how dangerous her secrets had been.

EIGHT

Vittoria had done more than dabble in the dark arts. I couldn't open the diary using force, so I tried a spell of un-making, burned herbs that helped with clarity, lit candles and prayed to every goddess I could think of, but the stubborn diary gave none of its secrets away.

I tossed the book on the floor and cursed. Vittoria had used a spell I'd never encountered. Which meant she'd probably figured out I'd snooped in her diary a few weeks ago. She *really* didn't want me to know her secret. And that made me even more determined to find out why.

I paced around our little room, watching the sun slowly rise. I needed a plan. Now. Aside from a forbidden truth spell here and there, I knew little of dark magic and how it actually worked. Nonna said the dark arts demanded payment since they took from something instead of using what already was. I'd happily sacrifice whatever I needed to in order to get what I wanted. I had one large clue and no way to access it. Except… I smiled as an idea struck. I couldn't break the spell, but I knew someone who might be able to: Carolina Grimaldi.

Carolina was Claudia's aunt and had taken Claudia in when her parents left for America a year or two apart. She was well versed in the dark arts, and was slowly teaching Claudia everything she knew. I didn't want to involve my friend, so I decided to go directly to the source of her knowledge. Carolina had a stall in the busy marketplace and, if I hurried, I might catch her before she opened her booth.

I grabbed a satchel and stuffed the grimoire sheets and diary inside, then ran for the door.

Nonna stepped into my path, frowning. "Is the devil chasing you?"

I hoped not, but that was up for debate. "Not that I know of."

"Good. Then you can sit a minute and tell me where you're running off to at this hour."

"I—" I almost confessed everything, but thought about my sister. Vittoria kept her secrets close, and was willing to die with them. There had to be a good reason why. "I wanted to stop by the

marketplace for some spices before we start prepping for dinner service. I have an idea for a new sauce."

Nonna stared at me hard, trying to see through my lies. Her expression was a cross between disappointment and suspicion. I hadn't shown much interest in food or creativity since Vittoria's death. Just when I convinced myself she'd send me back upstairs with a list of charmwork, she stepped aside. "Don't be late. There's much to do."

"Signora Grimaldi!" I hiked up my skirts and charged through the streets. Luck was finally on my side. I caught Carolina right before she crossed the road into the marketplace.

Carolina shielded her face from the rising sun, and stepped into the shadows of a nearby alley when she spotted me. "Emilia. I'm sorry for—"

"I don't have much time, signora. I need your help with something… delicate." I pulled the diary out and glanced around, ensuring we were alone. "There's some enchantment on here I've never seen. I was hoping you might tell me what it is and how to break it."

She took a small step away, staring at the diary like it was an abomination. "Nothing of this realm will do what you seek. Put it back where you found it, child. Its very presence calls them."

"Them?"

"The Wicked. This magic stinks of their world—it wants to be found."

I stared at Carolina, wondering if Nonna had somehow figured out my plan and had gotten to the dark witch first. "This is my sister's diary, not some demon book."

Carolina nodded to my satchel. "Show me what you've got in there." I did another subtle sweep of our surroundings before pulling out the grimoire sheets. I handed them to her, watching her face swiftly drain of color. "This is a summoning spell."

"I—I don't understand. Why would my sister need a summoning spell?"

"Maybe she was trying to control a demon."

I studied the black sheets. "That's impossible. All demons are trapped in Hell. Just like they've been for nearly a hundred years."

Carolina snorted. "Is that what your nonna's been telling you? Go home and try summoning one yourself, see what happens. Unless you have an object that belongs to a prince of Hell, these spells should only call forth a lower-level demon. They're easy to control and often trade information for little favors or trinkets. And I promise you, they

aren't *all* trapped in the underworld. Almost every witch—whether they pray to the goddesses of light or dark magic—knows that."

I stared at the dark witch, heart thudding. "Are you suggesting my sister was summoning demons and asking them for favors before she died?"

"There's no way to know for sure what she was doing, but I guarantee those spells are strictly for summoning. I doubt a demon aided her without some sort of bargain. They don't believe in doing charitable work. There's always some gain in it for them." She looked me over, her expression softening. "Forget what I said, child. Don't dabble in the demon realm. Whatever your sister was doing, I promise you'll want no part in it."

She sounded just like Nonna.

I thanked her and said good-bye, then quickly made my way to Sea & Vine. Instead of answers, I had more questions. If Carolina was right about the spell on Vittoria's diary not being of this realm, then opening it was impossible. Unless… An idea slowly formed, one that made my pulse race. If my sister *had* summoned a demon, maybe she'd had it use its brand of magic to seal her diary. I couldn't imagine any other reason my twin would summon a demon aside from that.

Despite the stories Nonna told us growing up, Vittoria knew I didn't really believe in the demon princes. I wasn't as skeptical about lesser demons, but I thought they were trapped in their realm with no means of escape. It would have been the perfect way for her to ensure I'd never unlock the secret she was so desperate to keep. And Vittoria was almost right, except for one detail.

She never could have predicted the way her death would change me. There was nothing in this world or the next that would keep me from solving her murder. And I *would* solve it.

I mulled over different theories during dinner service, barely concentrating at Sea & Vine. I kept trying to think like my twin. Some thoughts were wildly outlandish, others more plausible. But one idea stuck out from the others. This was the one I carefully considered as the day dragged on.

Maybe because it seemed so impossible. Or maybe because Vittoria didn't believe in the word. Whatever the reason, the idea stayed with me as I chopped vegetables, and cleaned my knives.

I thought about it on the walk home.

Then while I changed into my nightgown, and brushed out my hair.

It haunted me and I welcomed it.

Later, once I was tucked into my bed, I pulled out the grimoire sheets again. I scanned the unfamiliar script and grinned. It was my first true smile in weeks, and it was as dark and vicious as my

thoughts had been lately.

Vittoria had at least tried to summon a demon. The longer I sat with the thought, the more I accepted its truth. Tomorrow night, I'd try and summon one myself. Then, if it worked, I'd make a bargain of my own. In exchange for a small favor, I'd ask it to break the spell on her diary. I had nothing to lose—the summoning would either be successful, or it wouldn't. I'd never know what happened to my sister if I didn't set aside my doubts and try. With that, my decision was made.

All I needed now were some bones.

The next day at the restaurant passed by tortuously, but I managed to make good use of my time in the kitchen. I gathered everything the grimoire page listed, and no one suspected a thing. Except maybe Nonna. My grandmother stared at me across the island, silently chanting, as if she could read my mind and conjure a spell to pluck out the next thought before it took root.

Little did she know I'd been cultivating this idea since last night. I'd taken the bud of a plan and tended to it, urging it to blossom. Now it was full grown. I knew what I had to do.

I just needed the supplies and opportunity.

Nonna told us to hide from the Malvagi, to say our charms and bless our amulets with silvery shafts of moonlight and holy water, to never speak of the Wicked when the moon was full, and to do all the things a good witch did. Otherwise they'd steal our souls.

In the end, the monster we feared didn't come from Hell. He came from privilege.

That man standing over my twin—with his fine clothes and expensive knife—deserved punishment like anyone else. He couldn't just take what he wanted without facing the consequences. I was almost certain that the people I'd shown it to must have recognized his blade, but refused to speak out against him, fearing the repercussions. He might be powerful and wealthy, but justice would find him.

I'd make certain of it.

I still wasn't sure if he acted alone, or if he was a member of the mysterious *strega* hunters, and it didn't matter. He was the only one there that night. I would hunt him down first and find out more information later. If there were more people like him, I'd deal with it then.

I also had a plan to keep my family safe while tracking down Vittoria's killer. Instead of one simple bargain, I'd make two. First, I'd

have the demon I summoned break the enchantment on Vittoria's diary, and then I'd have it locate the mysterious dark-haired man. Thankfully, having a possession like the snake knife would allow for this.

A demon I could control was the answer to a prayer.

It seemed I'd been wrong earlier; the goddess of death and fury hadn't ignored my pleas. She'd simply been biding her time, waiting for me to turn my despair into something she could use. A twig was just a bit of broken wood until it had been sharpened into a spear. Grief carved me in half. And fury honed the pieces into a weapon.

Now it was time to unleash it.

NINE

Bone magic when used improperly can be part of the forbidden arts. Using the bones of animals—claws, nails, fangs, shells, and feathers—allows a witch to connect with the underworld. They must be gathered ethically, not sacrificed, as is popularly thought by humans. To harness their power, create a bone circle and include herbs and objects of intent.

—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire

I stood inside the lip of the cave, listening as the sea smashed into the rocks below, angry and insistent.

Salty spray raged up over the cliff, prickling the exposed skin on my arms and neck. Maybe the water was mirroring my mood. Or maybe it sensed the darkness of the rolled parchment tucked beneath my arm. I certainly could.

Witches were connected to the earth and channeled its powers into their own. I wouldn't be surprised if the sea was wary of what was coming—the dark power I was about to unleash upon our realm. The sea might be worried, but I was not. I had to wait hours for Nonna to finally fall asleep in her rocking chair before I collected my supplies and snuck out. Any lingering sense of worry was eclipsed by cold determination to carry out my plan.

I had no idea how Vittoria came across these grimoire pages—it was another mystery to add to an expanding list—but I'd use them to my advantage. A strong gust of wind forced me deeper into the cavern. I'd not been entirely sure where I was going when I left the house, but felt drawn here. Vittoria used to find reasons for us to venture up to this cave as often as she could when we were children. It was almost as if she were here, guiding me now.

The night air was balmy, but chills trailed sharp claws along my flesh.

I held up my lantern, trying not to cringe away from the shadows dancing around the light. Summoning a demon—in a dank cave where

my screams couldn't be heard if something went wrong—wasn't exactly how I would've envisioned my life three weeks ago.

Back then I would've happily spent my nights creating new recipes for Sea & Vine. I would have read a steamy romance, and wished a certain *fratello* would forsake his oath to God for one night and worship me instead. That was before I found my sister's desecrated body.

My current wishes centered on two things: finding out who murdered my twin, and why.

Well, three wishes if you counted my dream of gutting the bastard who killed Vittoria. That was more than a wish, though. That was a promise.

Satisfied there wasn't anything lurking in the cave with me—like rats or snakes and other unpleasant surprises—I set my lantern on a flat rock and my basket of supplies on the packed dirt. I'd studied the summoning spell until my eyes crossed, but shivered a little anyway as I pulled out the items I needed.

Black candles, fresh fern leaves, animal bones, a tiny jar of animal blood, and a bit of gold. I didn't have much of the latter lying around, so I brought the gold serpent dagger with me. It seemed only fitting that the mysterious stranger's blade would be used to hunt him down.

If everything went smoothly, a lesser demon would be contained within the circle. I knew it wouldn't be able to leave the designated area, but I was still less than excited to be in a darkened place alone with a monster from Hell. Even one easily controlled and magically bound.

I glanced over the sheet of carefully written notes again, stalling. For the summoning to be successful, I needed to follow the rules of the ritual *precisely*. Any deviations could unleash the demon in this realm. First, I needed to set up the circle, alternating the candles, ferns, and bones. Next, I'd set the tiny jar of blood inside the circle's boundary. Then I had to formally invite a demon to join me, using Latin, their native tongue.

I hesitated on that point. Latin wasn't my favorite subject Nonna tried teaching us. There were so many words that were similar but whose definitions were vastly different. One slight shift in meaning could bring disaster. It would've been less worrisome if I had more than a base understanding of the dark arts. Or if Vittoria's summoning spell also included a trusted ancient phrase to use instead of simply indicating one was needed based on the witch's intent.

My true intention was to find out what my sister had been doing before her death, then track down the person who murdered her and kill him. Violence and blood vengeance wouldn't be the politest way to open a summoning, though. And I worried about the repercussions

it could have. Luckily, I'd given great thought about what I wanted from the demon. I didn't want to offer it any opportunity to escape the circle, and I certainly didn't want it to harm me, so I decided on *aevitas ligati in aeternus protego.* Which roughly translated to "Bound forever in eternal protection."

Forever seemed like a wise idea when it came to making sure a demon couldn't leave the circle. And if it was forced to protect me, it couldn't very well attack me. For the final portion of the spell, I needed to prepare an exit. Apparently, demons were creatures of strict rules and had to adhere to them, so if I invited one to join me, I had to formally uninvite it and send it back to its realm. Good manners were advised, but I wasn't sure how well I could carry out *that* part.

I took a deep breath. "All right, Emilia. You can do this."

I slowly set objects down in a circle. Bone. Fern. Candle. With varying lengths, they looked like rays of an occult sun. I lit the candles and walked around the perimeter, clutching a bird's skull to my chest, the final piece I needed to make it complete. I hesitated.

If I placed this last bone in the formation, the circle would be set.

I inhaled, then slowly exhaled. I had no idea what kind of demon would answer my call. Some looked human and others were walking nightmares, according to Nonna. She never gave us specifics, which I wasn't sure was a blessing now. My mind was exceptional at picturing fang-toothed, claw-tipped, wicked creatures that crab-walked backward on multiple legs.

Clouds floated across the moon, creating a distorted effect on the cavern walls. Chills caressed my spine again. The goddess of storm and sea wasn't pleased.

I stared down at the skull I held, wondering if this was really the path I should take. Maybe I *should* blow out the candles and take myself back home and go to bed, forget about demons, witch hunters, and the devil. Nonna said once darkness was invited in, trouble shortly followed.

A flash of my twin's face—dark eyes sparkling with mischief, and her lips quirked up on one side—crossed my mind. Before I lost my nerve, I bent down and quickly fit the last bone into place. Silence swept around the chamber, sealing off the pleas of the sea. I crept over to the edge of the circle, the tiny jar of blood in hand, when a powerful blast of wind tore through the cave.

Bats screeched and flew at me. Hundreds of them. I screamed, tossing up my hands to protect myself as they raged around me like a living storm. Distantly, I heard glass break. I dropped to my knees, covering my head as little wings and claws tore at my hair and neck. Then, as quickly as it had happened, the bats were gone and the cave went still.

I took a few deep, shuddering breaths and slowly pushed a tangle of hair from my face. During the brief attack, it came undone from its simple braid. Long loose curls tickled my back like spiders, bringing on more goose bumps. Flower petals littered the ground like soldiers who'd fallen in a skirmish they hadn't seen coming. I'd forgotten there was a closed-off tunnel near the very back of the cave.

I pressed my lips into a thin line, furious with myself. If I could summon a demon, I could get over a bunch of bats.

In theory.

I stood on shaking legs and brushed myself down, shifting my attention to the summoning circle, and cringing at the broken glass winking in the moonlight. Blood splattered the ground around the perimeter, which was no good for me. It needed to be *within* its border to entice the demon.

"Stupid bats from Hell." I didn't have another jar of blood, and walking all the way back to the restaurant would take forever. The spell needed to be cast at night, and daybreak was only a couple of hours away. I'd never make it there and back in time.

I glanced around the cave, desperate enough to kill something if I needed to. Of course, now that I could *use* a bat or snake or another creature, it was truly empty. Kicking at rocks and muttering the sort of foul language that would make both my mother and Nonna's heads spin, I finally looked over Vittoria's mysterious grimoire sheet again.

Technically it didn't specify that *animal* blood was needed. It only advised using it.

I relit the candles and picked up the serpent dagger, reasoning that I needed it to complete the spell anyway. The time for hesitation and interruptions was over. Whether I liked it or not, if I wanted to break the spell on Vittoria's diary, this was my best option.

If I had to offer a little of my own blood, it was a small price to pay.

I ignored the pain as I dragged the blade over the top of my forearm; I needed my hands for cooking later and couldn't afford to cut my palm. The metal glowed as if pleased with my offering. Not wanting to think too hard about a blade that gloried in a blood sacrifice, I held my arm over the summoning circle and began chanting as soon as the first drops hit the ground.

"By earth, blood, and bone. I invite thee. Come, enter this realm of man. Join me. Bound in this circle, until I send thee home. *Aevitas ligati in aeternus protego.*"

I held completely still, waiting. For the earth to crack, the gates of Hell to snap open, hordes of witch hunters to rush me, or my heart to stop. Nothing happened. I was about to start chanting again when it began. Smoke swirled around the circle's edge like it had been trapped

in a jar, never crossing into the rest of the cave. It pulsed with energy; almost lovingly caressed my hand. I dropped the dagger and yanked my arm back, hugging it to me until the sensation ceased.

I couldn't believe what was happening. A stronger wave of darkness shifted around the circle, obliterating the inside of it completely from view. Black, glittering light emerged from the center. I could hardly breathe. A sound like a crackling fire in winter preceded the demon's arrival. I'd done it. I'd actually summoned a creature from Hell! If I didn't pass out from the shock, it would be a true success. I waited, heart hammering, for the smoke to clear.

As if answering my unspoken wish, a phantom breeze carried it away, revealing a tall, dark-haired man. His muscular back was to me and he wore only low-slung black pants. He wasn't at all what I expected from a lesser demon. Golden skin glistened in the candlelight, the smooth perfection broken only by an assortment of shimmering ink. His beauty was an affront to what evil ought to look like. I supposed I should be thankful he didn't have a serpent tail or wicked horns.

The demon rotated in place like he was getting acclimated to his new location. His chest and torso were chiseled in a way that indicated he was well-acquainted with weapons. My attention dropped to a metallic gold tattoo that started on top of his right hand, and coiled up and around his arm and shoulder. A fearsome snake. I didn't have time to catalogue its details because he was now fully facing me. I sucked in a sharp breath as I finally met his gaze. Dark gold irises with flecks of black stared back at me.

Beautiful. Rare. And lethal. Even though Nonna claimed their eyes were tinged red, I knew in the very marrow of my bones what he was.

"Impossible," I whispered.

He raised a brow. His expression was so human, I forgot, for a second, how he'd arrived in this cave. He shouldn't exist. Yet there he was defying all of my expectations. Tall, dark, and quietly seething. I couldn't drag my attention from him, worried he was either a figment of my imagination, or proof of madness. I'd used the dark arts. Maybe this temporary delusion was my price.

It was much easier to think that was true, rather than accept I'd done the impossible—I'd bound one of the Wicked to this realm. Which was very, *very* bad.

He was human looking enough, but was the physical embodiment of a nightmare.

Blood drinking, soul stealing, immortal creature of the night. I fought the urge to jump away from the circle and held his gaze instead. A storm raged within those eyes. It was like standing on the edge of a darkened shore, watching lightning dance closer across the

sea. A lick of fear trailed down my spine as he defiantly stared back. I had never been more grateful that I'd also bound him to protect. Instinctually I reached up and held my *cornicello* for comfort.

He looked ready to—*sweet goddess of fury*. His *luccicare* was black and gold. I'd only ever seen that once before. Recognition slammed into me, and I immediately dropped my *cornicello* and snatched my dagger from the floor. *His* dagger.

The hilt was as cool as the icy rage now rushing through my veins.

"I'm going to kill you," I snarled, then lunged for him.

TEN

Bones scattered as I attacked. The blade arced down, slicing a long, thin line across his hard chest. It should have pierced his heart. And it would have, if he hadn't maneuvered back so swiftly. A strange, searing pain erupted under my skin. I didn't want to consider what it meant—that maybe the mixture of our blood on the strange blade created a charm of its own. Or maybe the protection incantation also prevented me from striking him with a killing blow.

He yanked the dagger away with ease and tossed it on the ground.

I balled my hand into a fist and aimed for his center. It was like hitting a rock wall.

The demon stood there, allowing my assault to continue. While I exhausted myself with kicks and punches, he calmly looked around the chamber, enraging me more with his nonchalance. The demon didn't seem too worried, and I wondered how many times he'd been summoned and subsequently attacked. He studied the circle and his attention jerked down toward me, immediately narrowing in on the fresh cut on my arm. A slow frown formed before he hid it.

"Why. Won't. You. Bleed? Monster!" I was feral as I kicked and punched. My hatred and wrath so strong I almost got drunk on the intensity of it.

I glanced up in time to see him close his eyes, like he was enjoying those dark feelings, too. Nonna said demons pulled emotions to them, allowing them to wriggle and writhe around theirs. From the expression on his face, I was beginning to think that was true.

Disgusted, I stopped punching him and took a moment to catch my breath and regroup. Blood slipped down my arm and dripped to the ground. It wasn't his, though. It was from the cut I'd made to summon him. I didn't care if I bled myself dry if I took him to Hell with me.

"Bit of advice, witch. Yelling, 'I'm going to kill you' takes the surprise out of the attack." He grunted as I landed a swift blow to his stomach. My punches were slowing and he didn't look any worse for the wear. "You won't succeed in killing me, but it would be a vast

improvement in skill."

"Maybe I can't kill you, but I'll find other ways to make you suffer."

"Trust me, your very presence is accomplishing that." Blood drops hissed within the circle. That strange searing under my skin was growing unbearable, but I was too mad to pay attention. "What spell did you use, witch?"

I stopped, breathing hard. *"Vaffanculo a chi t'è morto."*

I wasn't sure if he knew exactly what the curse meant, but he must have deduced it had something to do with fornicating with dead family members. He looked ready to drag *me* back to Hell now. He suddenly staggered away, cursing. *"What spell did you use?"*

"Well, considering you're standing here, angry and unable to attack, I'd guess summoning spell, demon." I crossed my arms over my chest. "And one for protection."

Out of nowhere, gold light flashed over my arm before disintegrating into pale lavender. A tattoo in the same shade of purple—twin crescent moons lying sideways within a ring of stars—appeared on my outer forearm, burning almost as violently as my wrath.

I stood there, panting, until the searing in my arm finally ceased. I watched as he looked down at his own arm and gritted his teeth. Apparently he was also experiencing that awful pain.

Good.

"You demon-blooded witch. You *marked* me."

A pale tattoo had appeared on his formerly bare left forearm. Double crescent moons lying in a circle of stars. For a moment, he looked like he could hardly comprehend that I'd managed something so impossible. Honestly, I wasn't sure why he and I now had matching tattoos, either, but would rather die than admit that to him.

It must be the cost of the dark magic I'd used to summon him. I almost laughed. When Carolina told me the spells would summon a lesser demon, I'd had a hard enough time believing her. I wondered if I was having a nightmare—there was no way I'd *actually* summoned a prince of Hell. It would take more magic than I possessed to control a creature like him for any good length of time.

"This is impossible."

"On that much we can agree." He thrust his arm at me. "Tell me the exact phrasing of this spell. We need to reverse it before it's too late. There's only precious minutes left."

"No."

"You have no idea what you've done. I need to know the *exact* phrasing. Now, witch."

I was pretty sure what I did, aside from royally annoy him, was

ensure neither of us ended up dead by the other's hand. The tattoos likely acted as a magical bond of sorts. Unbinding us so he could rip out my heart like he'd done to my sister was the last thing I'd do.

"Unbelievable," I scoffed. "Demanding things when you're not the one with the power here." His expression was one of pure disgust. I hoped it mirrored my own. "*I* need to know who you are and why you killed my sister. Since you can't go back to your Hell dimension without me allowing it, I suggest playing by my rules."

I couldn't be sure, but there was a shift in the atmosphere around us, and I had the strangest impression his power slithered out, circled me, then slunk away. His nostrils flared. He was raging against the magical leash I'd put on him, straining to snap free. I watched, a small spiteful smile curving my lips. If he didn't hate me before, I'd accomplished that tenfold now. Perfect. It seemed we finally understood each other.

"One day I'm going to be free of this bond. Think very carefully about that."

I stepped close to him, angling my face up. "One day, I'm going to find a way to kill you. Think very carefully about *that*. Now, tell me who you are and why you wanted Vittoria dead."

He offered me a smile that probably made men piss themselves; I refused to give in to fear. "Very well. Since you only have minimal time to hold me here, and have already wasted precious minutes with your poor excuse of an assassination attempt, I'll play your game. I am the Prince of Wrath, general of war, and one of the feared Seven."

Before I could blink, he trailed a finger down my throat, pausing at the vein that throbbed beneath my skin. Undiluted dread shot through me. I shoved his hand away, and stepped out of the summoning circle. I noticed the scattered bones and scrambled to put them back in place.

His grin turned into something sharp and wicked.

"Congratulations, witch. You've succeeded in getting my full attention. I hope you're prepared for the consequences."

Arrogance dripped off him. Only a fool wouldn't be terrified of the beast I sensed lurking beneath his skin. He radiated power—vast and ancient. I had little doubt he could end my life with nary a thought.

All the same, the corner of my lips twitched.

Then, without warning, I bent over and began laughing. The sound bounced off the walls of the cave, magnifying until I wanted to plug my ears. I clutched my stomach, practically heaving from my outburst. Perhaps I *was* going insane. This night had gone from bad to worse faster than I could have ever imagined. I couldn't believe I'd summoned a prince of Hell. I couldn't believe royal demons existed. The world was downside up and upside down.

“I’m glad imminent death is so amusing,” he snapped. “It’ll make it all the more satisfying to slaughter you. And I promise your death will not be quick. I will glory in the kill.”

I waved him off like he was no more fearsome than a housefly. I could practically *feel* anger vibrating off him and winding its way into me. Even still, I had a feeling he was holding himself back. A lot. It was unsettling.

“Why, pray tell, are you laughing so hard?”

I straightened and wiped the corners of my eyes. “What, exactly, should I call you? Your highness? Oh, Feared and Mighty Seven? General Commander of Hell? Or Prince Wrath?”

A muscle in his jaw strained as he held my gaze.

“One day you’ll call me Death. For now, Wrath will do.”

ELEVEN

> ***A prince of Hell will never give their true name to their enemies. They can only be summoned through an object that belongs to them along with a powerful emotion. Their powers are tied to the sins they represent. Beware, for they are selfish beings who wish to use you for their gain.***
>
> *—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire*

"Wrath?" I didn't bother hiding my incredulous tone. Setting aside the extremely melodramatic "you'll call me Death" line, the whole obscene night ceased being funny in the this-can't-be-happening-cruel-fate kind of way. First, I'd been convinced he was a witch hunter and had murdered Vittoria because of what she was, only to discover he was one of the creatures we'd been hiding from our whole lives. Then, to have the demon who killed my sister within my grasp and not be able to harm him…

I must have *really* annoyed some goddess to be punished this horribly. His stupid name and all of his titles were the least of my concerns, but the anger pouring off him as I laughed made me inclined to torment him over it.

"That's ridiculous. I'm not calling you by an emotion. What's your true name?"

He pinned me with a cold stare as I retrieved his dagger. "My true name doesn't concern you. Address me by my House title. Unless you'd like to call me His Royal Highness of Undeniable Desire. That's always an acceptable option. If you want to bow, I wouldn't mind that, either. A little groveling goes a long way. I may grant you a boon and make your death swift."

My lip involuntarily curled. "Are you sure you're of House Wrath? If I didn't know better, I'd say you were general to a vacuous, shirtless battalion belonging to House Narcissism."

His expression was anything but friendly. "You flatter me. If you're so repulsed by my company, why not set me free?"

"Never."

"Dangerous word. I'd avoid speaking in absolutes if I were you. They have a tendency to *never* stick."

I forced myself to breathe. What I had wanted before I recognized him were answers. Now I wanted to carve him into a thousand bloody pieces and serve them to sharks. "Why did you murder my sister?"

He slowly paced around the summoning circle, likely testing its strength. "Is that what you think? That I ripped out your sister's heart?"

"You were standing over her body, *licking her blood from your fingers,* you revolting beast." I drew in a furious breath, watching him closely, though it was an effort in futility. His expression was inhumanly blank. Not one emotion betrayed his thoughts. Without thinking, I reached up and clutched my *cornicello* again. "*Why* did you murder my sister?"

"I didn't."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Her death was most inconvenient."

"Inconvenient?" I gripped the hilt of his dagger, debating how fast I might shove it into his heart before he hit me back. Not that he had. In fact, he didn't so much as lay a hand on me while I'd kicked and punched him. Odd for a demon of war. I shook my head. My protection charm was at work, not his conscience. "Yes, I imagine it must've been terribly inconvenient for *you* to find my sister murdered. Why were you in the monastery, then?"

A faint shimmering gold light flared up and fell back to the earth like a waterfall. It took a second to realize he was only answering me because of the summoning circle. And apparently he was fighting it. Feeling bold, I stepped near the line of bones and asked again, "Why were you there that night?"

Hatred burned in his eyes. "For your sister."

"What did you want her for?"

He smiled again, but it was more a promise of payback than amusement. "She made a bargain with my brother. I came to collect on it."

I turned away quickly, hoping to hide my surprise. I'd suspected that Vittoria had made a bargain with a demon to spell her diary, but I didn't think she'd summoned one of the Wicked. My focus slid to the basket I'd brought. My twin's diary was hidden a few feet away. Carolina said it called to the Malvagi, and I wondered if Wrath felt it now. I didn't want him getting his demon hands on whatever was in there, and decided against asking him to break the spell. I faced him again. "What were the exact terms of the bargain?"

"Not sure."

I narrowed my eyes. He was obviously lying, but I had no way to

force the truth from him. Unless I used one of the Forbidden spells. And that seemed like too much dark magic for one night. I was only willing to tempt Fate so much. “What did you do with her heart?”

“Nothing.” He gritted his teeth. “She was dead when I got there.”

I winced. Even though there wasn’t anything particularly cruel about what he said, the cold assessment of my sister’s death still hurt. “Why are you so concerned with the exact phrasing of the spell?”

This time his answer was much slower in coming, as if he was choosing his words very carefully. He finally said, “In order to adhere to its rules, I need to fully understand the protection spell, as you called it. Knowing the phrasing will also help me make sure others adhere to it. We have strict rules we’re governed by in the Seven Circles, and severe penalties if they’re broken.”

“By ‘others’ do you mean me?” He shook his head. “Who, then?”

“My brothers.”

I knew there were seven demon princes, but I didn’t think they were related. Imagining demons having families was disturbing. “Do all demons have to obey these rules, or just princes of Hell?”

“If we’re exchanging secrets now, I’d like to know how many witches live on this island, and the name of the coven elder from each city. Then you can tell me where the First Witch’s grimoire is and I’ll consider us even.” He smirked at my look of repulsion. “I didn’t think so. But I would like to know the Latin portion of the spell you used tonight.”

I weighed the benefits against the disadvantages of telling him the protection spell. He couldn’t harm me, that much was clear. And it wasn’t like he could reverse it, only I could do that.

“Aevitas ligati in aeternus protego.”

For a second, he didn’t appear to be breathing. He stared at me, his expression close to horror. A deep sense of satisfaction filled me. It wasn’t every day a witch caused that much fear in a demon prince, especially the mighty demon of war.

“No snide remark?” I asked, not bothering to hide my smug tone. “It’s all right. I know it’s an impressive one.”

“What’s impressive is how wrong you are.” He crossed his arms, his countenance once again carefully blank. “Regardless of your pedestrian attempt at dark magic, I’ll offer you a bargain in return. The length is negotiable, how we bind it is not.”

My face heated. Nonna said the Malvagi’s bargains almost always involved kissing—that once they’d locked lips with someone, that person lost their senses entirely. Always craving more, going so far as offering up their soul for another taste of the wicked sin they’d gotten addicted to. I didn’t know if all that was true, but I refused to find out.

“I’d rather die than subject myself to kissing you, demon.”

His expression held little humor as he took my measure. It was a slow, deliberate sweep of my body, my stance, the way I aimed his own dagger at his heart. If he looked at the bleached bones that surrounded us, he didn't give them more than a cursory glance. When he dragged his attention back to my face, something dark lurked in his gaze, forged deep in the pits of Hell.

Chills ran down my spine, tingling in warning. This was not the kind of prince written about in fairy tales. There was no golden crown sitting atop his dark head, or promises of safety waiting in his sculpted, tattooed arms. He was death and rage and fire and anyone stupid enough to forget that would be consumed by his inferno.

"One day you might beg me to kiss you." He stepped close enough for me to stab him. Heat radiated off him. Around me. A bead of sweat rolled between my shoulders, slipped down my spine. I shivered. He smelled of mint and warm summer days—so at odds with the darkness of his *luccicare*. "You might hate it. Or love it. But temptation will surge through those magical veins of yours, obliterating all common sense. You'll want me to save you from the endless torment by giving you everything you love to loathe. And when I do, you'll thirst for more."

An image of him pressing me against the wall, the stone sharp as talons in my back, his lips soft but demanding as he tasted me, crossed my mind. My mouth went as dry as the bones in my summoning circle. I would sooner sell my soul than be with him.

"Don't worry," he whispered, his lips brushing the delicate skin on my neck. I froze. He'd moved so swiftly, I hadn't even seen him take a step. "You'd need to be the last creature in all the realms combined for me to want you, witch. Even then it might not be enough to tempt me. What I'm offering is a blood trade."

TWELVE

Never enter into a bargain with a demon, but most especially a prince of Hell. The Malvagis' lies are like sugar—sweet, but deadly when too much is ingested over time. Beware: Very few antidotes can be crafted for such a wicked poison.

—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire

My heart thrashed from his proximity, the sound almost as loud as the waves attacking the cliffs below. He lingered a moment before stepping away, like he not only heard it, too, but relished the rhythmic, primal beat. I wondered if it reminded him of war drums, and if he suddenly craved battle. I certainly did. Too many emotions were swirling inside me, making my decision especially hard. My sister's possible bargain with his brother. Wrath's blood trade. This whole strange, impossible night. I was barely able to wrap my mind around the fact that the Wicked were not only real, but that one was standing before me, offering a bargain.

"Well?" he asked. "Do you willingly accept my blood trade?"

"You haven't bothered to explain *why* you're offering it, so no."

He took a deep breath, like the very act of explaining himself to a witch was exhausting. "Per the terms of your *protection* spell, I must ensure your safety. The spell binds me from harming you, but it also requires me to grant you protection from others. A blood bond between us will alert other demons that you are a temporary member of House Wrath, and therefore they should not kill or maim you too terribly. There. Will you agree to the blood bond now?"

Not maiming me *too terribly* wasn't the same as not maiming me at all. I stared, lips pursed. After a minute, I slowly shook my head. "No, I don't think I will. You're bound until I release you, and I don't plan on summoning any other demon. Therefore, I don't need your *protection*."

"First, I'm bound to this circle for three days. Not until you release me. Your… protection charm is different—that is, unfortunately, for eternity now." He rolled his shoulders, though it didn't appear to undo

the tension in them. “Second, the blood trade will allow me to sense when you’re in danger. Without it, I can’t guarantee your safety. Which puts me in violation of the rules that *you* made when you crafted that spell.”

“Is that so.” My tone accused him of being the worst liar I’d ever met. “None of that matters. When our time’s up, I’m releasing you back to Hell, not the shopping district.”

“Blood of a half-dead demon. This was your first summoning spell, wasn’t it?” He watched me carefully. I glared, but said nothing to deny it. He sighed. “Of course I’m bound to an incompetent fledgling until the end of time. Do us both a favor and don’t accept my offer. I’d prefer to not be your lapdog anyway.”

I cocked my head to the side. “You’d have to come whenever I called for you?”

“Not exactly, but like I said before, I would know when you needed me.”

“Why do you care about protecting me?”

“I don’t. But thanks to your spell I’m forced to, or I’ll risk having my powers diminished. Therefore, I am adhering to the terms. *Some* of us graciously accept our duty.”

Sure. When we were magically required to. “How *exactly* does the protection work?”

“Demons will sense the bond and reconsider harming you. It might not persuade all of them not to kill you, but it would give them pause. They’d know they’d incur my wrath as punishment for interfering in House matters.”

Much as I was loath to admit it, having the demon of war as a guardian angel wasn’t the worst luck. I didn’t have to trust or even like him—I only needed to have faith in my own instincts. Right now they were telling me he wasn’t responsible for murdering my sister. I was fairly certain this bargain was more beneficial to him, but I’d eventually find a way to bend it in my favor. And even if I couldn’t, it didn’t matter. Wrath didn’t seem to want me dead, and I needed to be very much alive to discover what happened to Vittoria.

“Fine. I accept your offer of a blood trade.”

“Willingly?” he asked. I nodded. “Hand me my dagger.”

I hesitated for only a second, recalling the protection charm I’d cast on him. For the first time since he appeared in the cave, he looked elated as I slid the blade into his waiting grasp. Before I changed my mind, he cut his finger and enticed a few blood drops to bead up. The wound sealed almost immediately after.

“I won’t have to… drink it, will I?”

He cast a quick glance my way. “What sort of stories have you been told about us?”

I mumbled “wicked blood-drinking deviants,” and he must have heard me because he didn’t bother asking for clarification.

“Unless you enjoy drinking blood, mixing mine with yours will do.”

Challenge rose in my steady gaze as I lifted my still-bleeding arm and he pressed his finger to my wound. He seemed just as repulsed by it as I was. I gritted my teeth, trading blood with a demon wasn’t my ideal evening, either, but here we were.

“Repeat after me, I… whatever your full name is, willingly accept this blood trade with House Wrath for the term of six months.”

“Six *months*?” I yanked free of his grasp and bunched my hands into fists. “That’s absurd! What if I don’t want your protection for that long?”

He rubbed his temples. “What is it that you want, witch? Why did you summon me?”

“To find out who murdered my sister.”

“And?”

I hesitated. I originally wanted to summon a demon to break the spell on my sister’s diary. I definitely didn’t want Wrath knowing about it now. At least not until I knew why Carolina said they’d come looking for it. “That’s it.”

“You’re lying.”

“And you haven’t?”

He shook his head. “Being bound to you prevents me from lying. It would be… discourteous to do so.”

“Of course. One must always have good manners while ripping the hearts from their enemies.” I looked him over, appraising. I wasn’t simply going to accept his word without proof. “If your magic wasn’t tethered by the protection spell, would you harm me?”

“If I had to, yes.”

And he didn’t sound all too put off by the idea. At least I knew he was telling the truth about being unable to lie. Instead of responding, like he seemed primed for, I waited. Nonna said a lot could be gained from reading the silence. He was a demon of war, but I understood strategy, too. It didn’t take long for him to fill the quietness.

“Believe what you will, but we’re aligned in the common goal of finding your sister’s murderer.”

He and I weren’t aligned in anything and never would be. Fury whipped around the cave, faster and mightier than the wind now howling outside. He gave me a bored look that made me seethe more. “Why do you care about finding justice for my sister?”

“I don’t,” he said. “Do not confuse me with a human with noble intentions.”

“If you want me to trust you enough for a blood bargain, or

whatever it's called, I need to know *why* you want to solve her murder."

He was quiet a minute, seeming to consider what information to share. "I want to stop the murderer before he strikes again. Aligning myself with you isn't ideal, but it's the hand I've been dealt and I'm playing it to my advantage. Not only are you a witch, like each victim before your sister, you're also connected to the most recent victim. At some point, I believe you may prove valuable in drawing out the killer; therefore, I'd like to sense when you're in danger so I can remove the threat."

I opened my mouth, but he held up a hand to stall me.

"I will not give you any more details unless you agree to the blood bond."

Wrath wasn't lying—he wouldn't tell me anything else unless I agreed. I might be *willingly* choosing his offer, but it didn't really seem like I had any other options. I thought about my sister—I knew exactly what she would do. I inhaled deeply. "You'll tell me more about my sister's involvement with your brother?"

"I'll exchange all necessary information."

Tricky demon. All "necessary" information didn't equal *all* information. I stared at him, trying to work out the uneasy feeling growing inside me. He claimed the blood bond was part of the protection spell I used, but I wasn't sure that was all. I thought about him having a link to me. He said he could tell when I was in danger, but I didn't like the idea of him knowing where I was. Demons might have rules and etiquette, but I knew nothing of them.

Maybe he considered dragging someone to Hell to reign there for eternity a high honor.

"Answer one more question for me," I said. "Aside from not being able to lie, what else are demons forbidden from doing?"

He waited a beat before responding.

"We also cannot enter a human home without an invitation. We're permitted to use our powers, but not to cause direct physical harm. And, once summoned, we are forced to remain in this realm until our invitation is withdrawn."

"If I withdrew your invitation now, would you have to leave right away?"

"Yes. Do we have a bargain?" He looked relaxed, casual. But his eyes were focused, sharp. He very much wanted me to agree to his offer. I thought about the stories Nonna told us as children, about how the Wicked could never be trusted. Wrath had been specifically named.

I wanted very much to be more like my twin. But I couldn't help being me.

“No, Prince Wrath. I do not accept your blood trade.”

THIRTEEN

A witch must never enter into a blood trade with a prince of Hell. By doing so, it allows the one conjured to have a direct link to the witch. It is unclear how long the bond lasts or if it can be broken. Never forget: forging a bond made from love is as dangerous as those made through hate.

—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire

Nonna glanced at the dagger strapped to my hip, then pounded chicken like she was envisioning someone's skull instead. I'd commandeered the weapon again before I'd left the cave, and Wrath had looked very much like Nonna now. If she was that put off by the demon prince's blade, I couldn't imagine how upset she'd be if she knew about the magical tattoo we shared.

I'd chosen a blouse with long fluttering sleeves to hide it. Before I went to bed, I inspected the two crescent moons within the circle of stars. The ink shimmered like moonlight. Despite the fact it bound me to Wrath, I didn't mind it all that much. It was delicate and pretty.

Thwack. *Thwack*. Nonna beat the poor chicken with singular focus. At least today's house special would be mouthwateringly tender for our customers. It was good some people still had an appetite. I'd certainly lost mine.

I ignored the way my stomach churned each time I thought about the events of last night. If Nonna knew I'd not only summoned one of the Malvagi, but almost willingly entered into a blood trade with one… I closed my eyes and fought the urge to lie down.

Nonna might stop pounding the chicken and walk herself off the nearest cliff instead.

My focus slid to the little clock above the stove. I wanted to finish dinner service and get back to the cave where Wrath was trapped before dark. Tonight I'd demand answers. Aside from his royal standing in Hell, I didn't know anything about him. For all I knew he *was* the devil and had his own evil agenda.

Regardless of all the unknowns surrounding Wrath, I was certain

of at least two facts. The first being he wanted to locate my sister's murderer and probably kill whoever it was. And the second was his desire to form a blood bond with me. I had no intention of going through with the creepy bond, but it gave me excellent leverage to use when I interrogated him. His brother seemed to be interested in bargaining with witches, and I wanted to know why.

If his demon brethren weren't responsible for murdering my twin, that made it all the more likely *strega* hunters were responsible. Having Wrath around to guard me while some witch-hating zealot was ripping out hearts might be wise. I'd let the demon prince fight him and run for safety. And if they destroyed each other in the process? Good riddance.

I sliced mushrooms for the sauce, adding it to the pan of garlic and shallots already simmering in butter. My work was mechanical today, the kitchen held little magic like it once did. It didn't help that my focus kept straying to the clock. I was worried about leaving a demon by himself all afternoon. Whether he was a prince of Hell or something worse, he was still undeniably wicked.

Before I'd left the cavern at daybreak, I'd cast an extra spell of containment that didn't go over very well with him. He couldn't harm me because of the protection charm, and I was fairly confident he wasn't lying about being trapped for three days, but I enjoyed taking extra precautions.

Especially when they made him spitting mad. Nonna told us the Malvagi couldn't stand sunlight, so I planned to be back before nightfall just in case my spell hadn't worked, or he'd somehow broken it.

Nonna set her rolling pin aside and handed the platter of flattened chicken to my mother to drench in flour. She watched me slice more mushrooms as she uncorked a bottle of marsala and splashed it into a hot pan, and I pretended not to notice.

"Distractions in the kitchen lead to accidents, Emilia." She wiped her hands and tossed the towel over her shoulder. "Do you need to sit down?"

I glanced up, pausing my assault on the mushrooms. "I'm fine, Nonna. Just tired."

And more than a little anxious about the last twenty-four hours. It was hard to grasp the fact that the monsters from my childhood stories were real. They didn't have red eyes, or claw-tipped fingers, or horns. The creatures from Hell were elegant, regal, well mannered. It upended my idea of how evil was supposed to present itself to the world. Wrath was supposed to be fang-toothed and drooling, not a shirtless wonder any artist would dream of painting.

"Nicoletta, do you have some advice for your daughter?"

Nonna turned to my mother for help, but Mamma was lost in her own sadness today. She placed a piece of chicken in a bowl of flour seasoned with salt and pepper, shook it free, then dropped it into a waiting skillet. Butter crackled and spit, pleased with the offering.

My mother took another piece of chicken and repeated the motion. All body memory, no conscious thought. I quickly looked away.

Nonna grabbed my chin, forcing me to meet her unflinching gaze. "Whatever trouble you've been seeking ends tonight, Emilia. The moon is almost full and it's no time to be playing with forces you have no hope of controlling. *Capisce?*"

"I haven't been searching for trouble, Nonna." I'd only summoned it to me. "Everything is fine. *I'm* fine, I promise."

Nonna released my face and walked away, shaking her head. "Nothing is fine, child. Hasn't been for a month and I imagine it won't be for many more to come. Vittoria is gone. Nothing will ever bring her back. It's harsh, but it's true. You need to accept it and grieve. Let go of your vengeance, or it will curse us all."

"You want *how* much for this shirt?" I scowled at Salvatore, the thief parading as a vendor. I shook the offending garment at him. "We are both speaking about this one, right? The one that's practically threadbare in the elbows?"

"It's a fair price." He held up his hands and slowly backed behind his table of goods. "Carolina is selling hers for a good bit more. See?"

Sal nodded to the stall across the alley. He had a point, but everyone around here knew—and admired—Claudia's aunt Carolina as "the schemer." Only wealthy people who enjoyed a stroll through the crowded marketplace paid her inflated prices, though. I imagined it had more to do with the fact she'd spelled the items to be irresistible to certain clientele. I fought the urge to look toward her booth, just in case she called me over to ask how my demon summoning went.

Even practitioners of the dark arts feared the Wicked.

I handed Sal the coins and shoved the shirt into my sack, grumbling the entire time. As much as I'd love to stay and haggle over the poor excuse for clothing, the sun would slip past the horizon soon, and I needed to make sure the demon was still trapped in the circle.

I hurried through the rush of the early evening crowd, ignoring people calling out for me to sample cheese, try their street food, or buy a lovely set of earrings. Unless they could sell me a demon spell to unlock my sister's diary, I wasn't interested.

"Emilia?"

I halted at the end of the street that eventually turned into the steep, winding path of the abandoned cavern. Maybe I'd imagined her voice. I closed my eyes, praying I had. I wasn't ready for this meeting and even if I was, I was running out of daylight. Wicked creatures came out in the dark, and I knew at least one who wanted to slip his leash.

"Emilia! It *is* you, thank the stars. I've been hoping to see you here."

I took a deep breath and pivoted to face my friend. "Hi, Claudia. How—"

She crushed me in a hug, her sudden tears soaking my collar. "It's been a whole month and I still can't believe it. Even after seeing her laid to rest." Claudia stepped back and shook her dark curls. Her hair was shorter than the last time I'd seen her. It looked good. "I've had the strangest… dreams lately. My aunt thinks they're urgent messages."

We both scanned the street, but no one was near enough to overhear us. By "dreams" my friend meant "visions." Claudia's magic worked best with scrying. Sometimes her visions were more than visions. And other times they weren't. The trouble was, we could never tell which was a gift from the goddess of sight and premonitions and which was purely her imagination.

I hated that I'd left her alone to worry over potential meanings. Vittoria used to jot notes and ask a hundred different questions. I desperately wished she were by my side now.

"What did you see?"

Claudia glanced around. "It's more a warning than a true vision, I think."

And whatever it was, it clearly terrified her. My friend looked ready to jump out of her skin. I reached over and gripped her hand in mine. "What is it?"

"I don't know… I saw black wings and an empty pitcher being filled and emptied. It was all very strange. I think some terrible darkness is coming," she said. "Or it's already here."

Goose bumps rose across my body in waves. I swallowed my shame. I had no doubt Claudia had seen me summoning Wrath. Dragging a prince of Hell from the underworld was a huge feat—I couldn't imagine the kind of magical tremors it must have set off. I'd disrupted the natural order of this world. I brought forth that which didn't belong. It was the darkest sort of magic, and I wasn't surprised a dark witch sensed it.

"Maybe it's just the way your mind is explaining away Vittoria's…"

"You're probably right," she agreed quickly. "Domenico is a mess,

too. He visits the monastery at least twice a week to pray."

I was happy we'd steered the conversation away from the Great Big Evil I'd invited into our world, though thinking of my sister lying in the monastery brought on its own awful feelings. I tried not to focus on Claudia's tear-stained face. The last thing I wanted was to start crying and show up red-eyed and splotchy when I confronted Wrath. I wanted to project fearlessness and ferocity, not a sobbing, snotty mess.

It was the only thought that kept me from breaking down. Well, that and hearing my sister's secret lover had been praying so often. With my grief and then the desire to unlock her diary, I'd forgotten all about him. "I didn't know they were publicly…"

I wasn't sure what to call it. Not a courtship, because Domenico hadn't spoken to my father and Vittoria certainly hadn't mentioned him. If I hadn't seen his name scrawled in her diary, we wouldn't know she liked him at all. That thought ached, so I shoved it deep down where it couldn't hurt me, with the other unpleasant feelings I'd been storing lately.

"What else has Domenico said?"

"I'm not sure. He hasn't talked to me about anything. He mostly locks himself in one of the empty chambers, and lights prayer candles until after midnight. I think he's there now, actually. He always looks so sad."

I wanted to speak with him and knew I should, but didn't feel ready to just yet. I reasoned it might be cruel to show up, looking like the mirror image of his murdered lover. The truth was, I wasn't ready to confront one of my sister's secrets without my heart breaking the rest of the way.

Claudia looped her arm through mine and guided us off the main road. "Fratello Antonio is worried about you. Since you were the one who…" She swallowed hard. "Now that he's back from his travels putting rumors of shape-shifters to rest, it might be good to speak with him. Just to help find solace."

Solace was the furthest thing from vengeance and I wanted nothing to do with it. The brotherhood would advise me to say prayers and light candles like Domenico. Neither of which would help avenge my sister, or break the spell on her diary. Even if I confessed the darkest desires in my heart, there wasn't anything Antonio could do to help me. He was just a human.

I mustered up a smile, knowing Claudia was coming from a place of love. And she had enough to worry about with her own unsettling visions. "I will talk to him. Soon. I promise."

Claudia studied my face. "Make sure you visit me while you're there, too. I miss you. I can't imagine what you're going through, but

you're only alone if you choose to be, Emilia. Please don't forget that you're still living and are loved. And, if you let me, I can help."

I pictured confirming her fears about her dream, telling her all about what I did last night; about the demon I'd plucked from the underworld and stashed away in ours. And not just any demon, but if he was to be believed, a prince of war. A demon so vicious and mighty he was the living embodiment of wrath.

If Claudia knew what I was planning next, I wondered if she'd still be willing to help.

I took one look at the determination in her eyes and decided she might.

"I…" I inhaled deeply. I didn't trust Wrath with this secret, and Carolina couldn't help, but maybe Claudia could. I pulled my sister's diary from my satchel. "There's a spell on this I can't break. Your aunt said the magic wasn't from this realm. It's possibly demonic in origin."

Claudia's eyes widened as she brushed her fingers over the cover. "It's… ancient."

"Do you think you could find out what sort of magic was used?"

She nodded vigorously. "I can certainly try."

"It's dangerous," I warned. "You can't tell anyone you have it, or show it to anyone."

"I won't. Promise."

I let the diary go. As I turned to leave, a shadow loomed above my friend and hissed, *"He's here."*

"What?" I half-screamed and stumbled back. It was the same disembodied voice I'd heard the night my sister had been killed. I'd never forget the sound. "Who is?"

"Who is what?" Claudia glanced around and then reached over to steady me. "Are you all right, Emilia? You look as if you've seen the devil."

"I—"

"Did you hear that?" I dragged a hand through my hair and tugged at the roots. Nothing was there. No menacing shadow or dire warnings from beyond. Maybe I needed the church after all. I could certainly use all the prayers I could get. "It's nothing. I thought you said something else."

Claudia seemed unconvinced, but after a strained moment hugged me good-bye with a promise to learn everything she could about the mysterious spell.

I heard Nonna's voice in my head as I hurried out of the city, constantly tossing looks over my shoulder to see if anything followed. She'd been right—*nothing* was fine.

And I was starting to think it might never be again.

FOURTEEN

"**Put this on.** No one should be subjected to *that* all night, demon."

Wrath snatched the shirt a second before it hit his face and actually cringed. Honestly, I couldn't blame him. Wrinkled tawny suede, elbows worn thin, and crisscrossing drawstrings at the chest. He stared like I'd dragged in a decaying carcass and told him to skin it and sew it into a jacket.

He set his jaw. "No."

"No?" I tilted my head like I hadn't heard him correctly.

"It looks like you balled it up and left it in the bottom of a drawer for months, and it smells like you wiped out pig innards with it." He tossed it back at me. "Fetch me something more suitable, or deal with me as is."

"Excuse me?" I marched up to the line of bones and crossed them without hesitation. I stood toe-to-toe with him, fuming. A wild gleam in my eyes dared him to tell me no again. "Put. The. Shirt. On. *Now*."

"Does the sight of my bare skin get under yours? Did you have sinful thoughts about me last night?" He gave me a lazy grin. "That's usually my brother's specialty, but fear not, we've all got bedroom talents."

"Pig."

"Care to roll around the dirt with me?"

Anger poured off me. "You wish."

"I don't." I swore the temperature dropped to match the iciness of his tone. "You call *us* wicked, but you witches are vengeful creatures without soul or conscience." He nodded to his dagger I'd strapped to my hip. It looked ridiculously out of place against my dark flowing skirt and matching blouse with fluttering sleeves. But I didn't care. He wasn't getting it back. "Stab me if you must, but I'm not putting that monstrosity on."

"You can't possibly be serious. It's a shirt." I stared up at him and I couldn't begin to understand the new look in his eyes. "Need I remind you that you aren't in any position to make demands or deny me?"

His annoyance joined mine in unholy matrimony.

"Here's a little lesson since you seem to be woefully uneducated, witch. Summoning does not equal *owning*. Containment isn't forever."

He moved near enough that I either had to remain and feel the heat of his body, or shift away to hold his gaze. It took a moment for me to yield a step, but I finally did.

I couldn't believe he wanted to argue over clothing while I was reeling over my personal ghost from Hell. *If* it was even real and not some sinister creation my mind conjured to haunt me.

"I can and will deny you whenever I choose," he said, his voice now dangerously low. "Do not *ever* make the mistake of thinking you wield any power over me other than the spell that contains me here. And even that won't last."

He took a deep breath, like he was enjoying the anger emanating from me. I thought about punching him again, but refrained. "You can't break the spell without me, demon."

"Maybe not. But containment spells—like summoning spells—last three days. After that, I'm free to leave this circle and do as I please." He finally stepped back and leaned against the cavern wall, watching me digest the information. "Have you come to verbally spar all night, or have you changed your mind about the blood bond?"

"Neither. I've come to interrogate you about witch hunters." His sudden laughter startled me. I recovered quickly and crossed my arms. "Why is that funny?"

"Information is currency where I'm from. No one expects to get something for free. If you walked into any of the royal houses and demanded information, they'd skin you alive."

I hoped he couldn't hear the pounding of my heart as I let that visual take shape.

"Agreeing to a blood trade doesn't count as payment?" I asked. He straightened up and immediately lost the grin. That got his princely attention. "I believe in making informed decisions. Therefore, I request an exchange of some basic information. Surely that won't be too much for you to agree to."

He inspected me the way someone might look at a cat if it suddenly started ordering the servants around. "Very well. I will indulge you by answering *some* questions. Choose wisely."

"Have you heard of any humans who have banded together to hunt witches?"

He shook his head. "Not at this time. Though history has shown them to be active, so I'm sure they exist."

"Which of your brothers bargained with my sister?"

"Pride."

I closed my mouth. In human religion the devil was often

associated with that particular sin. Last night Wrath only told me my sister had made a deal with his brother; he hadn't mentioned the actual devil. Which meant…

A memory sprang to the forefront of my mind. The night before Vittoria was murdered, I'd demanded to know what she'd been doing at the monastery.

"I was summoning the devil. An ancient book whispered its secrets to me, and I've decided to take him as my husband. I'd invite you to the wedding, but I'm pretty sure the ceremony takes place in Hell."

Blood and bones. Vittoria hadn't been teasing. Questions swarmed around my head like angry bees.

"Was that all you wanted to know, witch?" Wrath stepped into view, breaking into my thoughts. My sister had told me the truth, and I'd let her down. I didn't ask questions, or take her seriously. I should have known better—she always said outlandish things to humans, and delighted in them thinking she was lying. If I wasn't so annoyed with her for embarrassing me in front of Antonio, I would have paid closer attention. I *should* have paid closer attention.

I took a steadying breath. I'd start noticing every detail now.

"Why did Pride want to marry her?" I asked. Wrath's expression became impossible to read. My patience frayed. "I know my sister agreed to marry him. She told me so herself."

He didn't move, but I pictured his mind whirling as he probably formulated a thousand different scenarios, and tallied benefits against costs to information sharing. I honestly didn't think he'd respond. He didn't look pleased when he finally did. "Pride needs to marry in order to break a curse that was placed on him."

"Why are you helping?"

He flashed his teeth. "I was bored. It seemed like fun."

If he really couldn't lie to me, that had to at least be partially true. "So, what… your mission is to find someone who's willing to marry Pride?"

"Yes. He's in need of a witch bride, specifically. Part of my task involves ensuring his betrothed makes it to our realm safely, should she accept his bargain."

"Why does he need to marry a witch?"

"He requires someone with magical abilities to break the curse."

"What if she refuses?"

"Then she's made aware of opposing… forces… that wish her harm."

It was a very polite way of saying if she declined the offer, she'd risk death.

"The other two victims were also witches. Which means they were offered the same bargain as Vittoria," I said mostly to myself, thinking

over the new information aloud. Wrath nodded politely anyway. “Were they killed before or after you spoke with them?”

“After.”

“You allow them time to consider the deal?”

“Of course. They’re given a full day to think it over.”

I was surprised by this. If I needed someone to accept a bargain to break a curse, time would be the last thing I’d want to give them. Too much could go wrong.

“How do you choose the witch?” Wrath gave me a look that said question time was drawing to an end. “At least answer this, demon. How many others from your world know who you’re offering the bargain to?”

“Only Pride and I.”

I mulled that over. That actually made the list of suspects greater. Instead of worrying about a spy in Wrath’s kingdom, it opened up the possibility of the victims telling people about the devil’s bargain in this world, too. Then those people who’d been told could have said something, or were overheard by others. A full day was a long time for the gossips to get to work.

Except… there was one major issue with that theory. *Streghe* didn’t spill their secrets. I thought about witch hunters again. Wrath didn’t sound like he thought they were a threat, but I hadn’t found any evidence to completely rule them out. It still made the most sense that they were responsible. Perhaps they’d somehow uncovered who the true witches across the island were, and the devil’s bargain timing was a coincidence.

“Will you tell me who the next witch is?”

“No.”

I considered my options. I could send notes to the twelve other families in Palermo, but there was a chance they could be intercepted. Showing up at their homes or businesses was also risky in case we were being watched, so that wasn’t an option. In these strange times, I had to be very cautious about each of my moves. My good intentions might end up costing someone their life. Hopefully the others were taking precautions after the recent murders.

Wrath stepped to the edge of the bone circle, looking like trouble. “Well? Are you ready to become a member of House Wrath?”

“No. Until you decide to work with me as an equal, I decline your offer of *protection*.”

His smile was filled with venom. “You weren’t ever planning on accepting the blood trade, were you?” I ignored him and plucked my satchel up from the ground and headed for the cave entrance. Wrath called out, “Where are you going?”

“To the monastery.”

“These are dangerous times; you shouldn’t go alone. Set me free and I’ll come with you.”

As if I’d let that happen. “Next time.”

“Benediximus.” Good luck. “It’s your funeral.”

His dark chuckle followed me all the way back to the city.

FIFTEEN

Two streets away from the monastery, I felt the unmistakable sensation of being watched. I pretended not to notice for a solid block before casually making my way down an empty street. If I had to resort to magic, I didn't need any witnesses reporting my so-called devilry to the church. When we were much younger, a *fratello* named Carmine used to search for anyone with evil in their soul. I'd heard the church had sent him to northern Italy, but I thought of him every now and again. Especially when outside the monastery, primed to use magic.

I gripped my *cornicello* and squinted into the alley beside me, searching for purply *luccicare* that indicated a human was near. At first, I didn't see a thing. And then…

A low, smooth voice spoke from the shadows. "Well, this is *quite* a surprise."

Hair on the back of my neck stood on end as a man emerged from the darkness. His hair was black silk, and his eyes were an animal-like green. No human had eyes that color, and the strange, glittering *luccicare* surrounding him indicated what I already suspected: Malvagi. I wasn't sure why, but I let go of my amulet and subtly tucked it inside my bodice.

"You're…" Another demon prince. One I *hadn't* summoned to this realm. Which meant there were other ways for them to get here. Something I should have realized sooner since Wrath had been the one standing over my sister last month. Impossible was becoming quite the joke.

I stepped back, and silently prayed to the goddess of battle and victory. The new demon smiled as if he'd read my thoughts. I wanted to look away, but couldn't. It was as if that odd, pulsating energy of his held me captive no matter how much I wanted to scream.

Instead of panicking, I catalogued details. He was almost as tall as Wrath, and was arresting as opposed to classically handsome, but drew greater attention because of it. He had well-trimmed facial hair that accentuated the hard angles of his face. Staring at him, I almost

felt a twinge of—

"Envy." The demon managed to make a singular word sound both threatening and inviting. "And you are… intriguing."

I didn't want to be intriguing. I didn't want to be alone with him. I wanted to escape. I didn't manage to accomplish any of those things. I stood there, frozen with bone-deep terror. The Wicked hadn't been seen in this realm for almost one hundred years. Now at least two of them were here.

I couldn't quite grasp why, but I felt this prince was different from Wrath. There was something about him that came across as lethally angelic. But if he ever had a halo, it was broken now. I wanted to drop to my knees in supplication and also scream for mercy.

Envy lurked at the edge of the alley. Just as Wrath had been the first evening I'd encountered him, his brother was dressed in fine clothes. His suit was solid black, but his shirt and vest were several shades of swirling green shot through with silver threads. He also had a dagger strapped to his side, but this one had a giant green gemstone lodged into its hilt.

All my senses tingled with warning. And fear. This midnight creature wasn't bound to protect me, and I was acutely aware of my vulnerability.

This skirt had no secret pocket, so I'd left my moon-blessed chalk at home. Which meant I had no way to draw a protection circle, no herbs to offer the earth, and I had a feeling running would only amuse him. I almost choked on terror. I was at the mercy of this devil.

My panic abruptly shifted into something else. A fierce, overwhelming dark feeling fluttered around me like expansive leathery wings. It was cold and ancient—with no beginning and no ending. Like all magic, it just *was*.

And I longed for all of it to be *mine*. Every last drop.

I was suddenly jealous of the immense power these demons wielded. Why did the Hell creatures deserve it all? Why was I less worthy of possessing some power of my own?

I was goddess blessed, not demon cursed!

If I had even a *fraction* of that magic, I could force others to tell me what happened to my twin. I could stop another witch from losing her life in a demonic bargain. And I could bring the underworld to its knees. I wanted what they had so badly that I burned with hatred. It was an ice-cold hate so potent that I was frozen down to my very core.

It was too much. Wanting that which would never be mine…

Envy leaned forward, a hungry gleam in his strange eyes. I had the oddest impression that he suffered from those same feelings. That he envied his brothers in a way that almost drove him mad. I could never imagine feeling that way about my twin. It must be so lonely, so

isolating.

I held the dagger I'd taken from Wrath, pressed it into my chest, and almost groaned with pleasure as blood beaded up. It pierced my skin with such terrible ecstasy. I was ready to carve out my own heart just to stop the consuming pain of knowing I'd never possess that power—

A little electric current pulsed from my tattoo, sending sparks of energy across my skin, and the spell shattered. I blinked as if coming out of a vivid dream. I glanced from the blade in my shaking hand, to the green-eyed demon whose attention shifted to my arm.

Envy must have been either feeding me his emotions, or turning mine against me.

"Exceptional," the demon prince said. "Did you feel as I did?"

If he felt like an endless abyss of nothingness, hatred, and ice, then yes. "What did you do to me?"

"Allowed your inner desires to surface. Some call them sins."

I shivered, feeling violated in a way I'd never known and hoped to never experience again. I'd almost shoved a blade through my heart. If my tattoo hadn't stopped me, I'd be dead. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd been wrong about witch hunters; maybe Nonna had been right all along and humans weren't to blame.

It definitely felt like this demon was responsible for the bodies with missing hearts.

Envy had affected me even with my *cornicello*. My little charm had been no match for a prince of Hell. I wasn't even sure if he'd used all of his power, or a small part of it.

If he'd done that while I was in the kitchen with my family…

I closed my eyes, not wanting to even *think* about what he could have forced me to do to them. And how powerless I'd be to resist him. I wondered if any of our precautions and spells or charms truly worked, or if they'd only succeeded in giving us a false sense of security.

With creatures like Envy roaming the earth, I didn't believe we'd ever truly be safe. I had the sudden urge to cry. No wonder Nonna told us those stories and tried to hide us.

These demons were worse than nightmares. And now they were here.

"Strange." Envy set his animal-like gaze on me, curious. I glanced down at my tattoo, startled to see snakes now twined around the crescent moons, forming a larger circle around them. I'd been so distracted by fear, I hadn't felt the burning in my forearm. Envy's attention cut to the dagger now safely tethered to my hip again and a slow, cunning smile touched his lips. "How very interesting indeed. Such tangled, tangled webs. Summoned through hate, bound by

blood."

"What do you mean?"

He shoved gloved hands into his pockets. "You have something I want."

"If it's my still-beating heart, I'm afraid I must decline."

"No, but I imagine you'll end up giving that to my brother one day."

His tone was flat. I wondered if Wrath knew how jealous he was, but said nothing.

"Perhaps we can strike a bargain. If you agree to sell your soul to House Envy, I will help you find what you seek." His expression was inhuman and ice cold as he waited. The hair on the nape of my neck stood at attention. "I covet unique things. You would make an interesting gift to my court. Do you sing?"

"I'm not unique." Nor was I a "thing" or a "gift" to be passed around like a curiosity at a party.

"Aren't you, though?" He smiled. "It's been a great long while since I last saw a shadow witch. I should like very much for you to join my House."

I didn't know what he meant by shadow witch, and it was the least of my worries. An image of humans and witches frozen solid as morbid displays on a grand checkerboard crossed my mind. Envy seemed like the kind of demon who'd proudly show off his trophies, hoping others would be struck with jealousy over his *coveted* possessions.

I swallowed my growing panic, unsure if it was an image he'd fed to me. I didn't want to ever find out if that fear held any kernel of truth.

"Well?" Envy asked, an edge creeping into his tone. "Are you willing to join my House? I can offer protection from my realm and my brothers. You'll certainly need it, especially with all of the unfortunate murders here of late."

My heart drummed madly. There was an old proverb Nonna always muttered that claimed "better the devil you know than the devil you don't" and I'd never felt the truth in something more. If given a choice between bargaining with Wrath or Envy, I'd choose Wrath.

I had little doubt that Envy would love nothing more than to take his deadly blade to my skin and slowly peel away the layers, discovering what *exactly* made me a shadow witch.

Whatever that was.

Knowing a little of their rigid, well-mannered ways, I didn't want to anger him by declining too soon. After what felt like an entire millennium had passed of me pretending to consider his offer, I finally

said, “Not at this time, thank you.”

He seemed on the verge of arguing his point, but suddenly inclined his head as if in deference. His gaze tracked back to the tattoo on my arm.

“Very well. Even we princes of Hell don’t know what the future may hold. You may change your mind, or alter your views yet. I will still accept you when and if you choose my House over my brother’s.” The demon turned and headed for the opposite end of the street, pausing at the crossroad to glance back. “Be warned; the others grow weary. If they haven’t already started hunting, they *will* come for you soon. Let this serve as your warning, and as a boon from House Envy. Pick a House to align yourself with, or the decision will be made for you.”

SIXTEEN

Nearby, fire crackled. Smoke followed soon after, slithering through the air like a fleeing serpent. When I first saw the Prince of Wrath in the monastery, I'd heard a similar sound. Maybe fire and smoke had something to do with how demons traveled between realms.

Now that Envy was gone, my breaths were coming hard and fast, almost matching the frantic pounding of my heart. Eighteen years of hiding from the Malvagi, and I'd just been trapped with one who'd used his powers on me. And I survived. I wanted to either laugh or vomit. Before I managed either, I needed to convince my knees to stop quaking.

Holy goddess, that was the most harrowing experience I'd ever had. If my sister had gotten involved with the Wicked, unraveling her secrets while remaining safe just got harder. I wasn't sure I'd be so lucky the next time I met a prince of Hell alone. They altered the very space around them. And it didn't look like it had taken much energy—if any at all—for Envy to do that. I glanced down the street. It was still blessedly empty. Before Envy showed up, I'd been on my way to the monastery. Claudia mentioned Domenico was there, and I thought it might be time to ask him if he knew what—

Fear gripped me until I could hardly breathe. Envy said I had something he wanted. Besides my *cornicello,* which I'd tucked inside my bodice where he couldn't see it, and Wrath's dagger, I didn't have anything on me. But Claudia had my sister's diary, and if the Malvagi could truly sense it, then Envy might already be hunting her down this very moment.

If anything happened to her…

I took off toward her home, running so fast I almost lost my sandals as my feet pounded uneven stones. I ran harder, focusing solely on getting to Claudia's house before the demon did. I jumped over baskets laid out, past chamber pots and chickens that ran through the side streets. I dodged laundry lines and managed to only bump into one unpleasant fisherman as I skidded to a halt outside Claudia's door.

I grabbed the iron knocker and pounded until a candle flared to life upstairs. Claudia poked her head out from the window on the second story.

"Emilia? Blood and bones. You scared me! Hang on."

I whipped around, scanning the dark street. There was no sign I'd been followed. I also didn't feel any sort of presence watching, and I hoped that meant Envy was somewhere far away.

A moment later, the bolt slid loudly and the door swung open. Claudia motioned for me to come inside. I rushed in and slammed the door behind me, breathing hard.

"What the devil is wrong, Emilia?"

"Is your aunt home?"

"Not yet. She stayed a little later at the booth tonight. What happened?" She held up her candle, searching my face. "You look terrible."

I blew out a shaky breath. "Did you find anything out about the spell on the diary?"

"Not really. The magic is old, definitely not of this realm. But there's something else that's strange about it. I need more time to really—"

"No!" I reached over and gently squeezed her shoulder to soften the blow of my words. "I want you to forget all about the spell and the diary. Please. It's too dangerous."

Claudia narrowed her eyes. "Does whatever happened have to do with the vision I had?"

"Maybe." I rubbed my temples. A giant headache was starting. "Listen, I—I'm not sure what happened tonight, but the Wicked are here. And I think their arrival has something to do with Vittoria's diary. Whatever the reason, I don't want to draw any attention to the book. Or you."

"Did you speak with one of them?"

I nodded. "The Prince of Envy and I just had a lovely conversation. It started with me almost carving out my heart."

I expected a sharp intake of breath, or some indication that my friend was completely terrified that the Wicked were indeed roaming around Sicily. Maybe she thought I'd hit my head. She calmly went to the cupboard and pulled out a bottle of herbal spirits she'd made. She poured us each a mouthful and set my glass in front of me.

"Sit." She pointed to one of the wooden chairs. "Drink this. It'll calm your nerves."

I plopped into the seat and brought the glass to my nose. It was mint and something citrusy. Maybe lime. I tossed it back, relishing the sharp flavor. *"Grazie."*

Claudia drank hers down, and put the bottle away.

“You don’t seem surprised,” I said. “Did you know they were here?”

“I suspected.” She pressed her hip against the table and sighed. “When the murders started and the hearts were stolen, I immediately thought of the curse.”

“You mean the blood debt between the First Witch and the devil?”

“No,” she said slowly, “I mean the curse.”

I drew my brows together. Wrath said the devil wanted to break a curse. “Was the curse placed on witches, or someone else?”

“That’s just the thing.” Claudia moved around the table and dropped her voice. “No one knows for sure. Dark witches believe it was the price La Prima paid for the vengeance spell she cast on the devil.”

That was plausible. Dark magic demanded payment. But casting a spell on the devil… I shuddered despite the sweltering summer heat. I vaguely recalled Nonna mentioning it, but she didn’t seem convinced of its validity. “Why did she curse the devil?”

“Old stories claim he stole her firstborn’s soul. From that day forward the devil was trapped in Hell for eternity. His brothers could travel between realms within reason, typically the days before and after a full moon, but he would never set foot outside the underworld. And that wasn’t all. Supposedly he’d only retain his full powers if a witch sat on the throne beside him, wearing the Horn of Hades to keep the balance between realms.”

“The Horn of Hades? Is that a crown?”

“There’s no written documentation on what it is, or how it works exactly. My aunt thinks part of the curse included removing or blocking our memories. She also believes that’s what really happened to old Sofia Santorini; that her scrying session unveiled something about the curse it wanted forgotten.”

“By ‘it’ you mean the curse? Like it’s its own entity?”

Claudia nodded. “It’s strange that no one recalls certain details. Everyone has a slightly different myth or legend, but no one knows the truth.”

“Nonna never mentioned any of this.”

“Not surprising. My aunt said witches of the light don’t believe La Prima would cast such a dangerous spell. It goes against their image of what it means to be goddess blessed. Who knows?” Claudia lifted a shoulder. “Stories twist each time they’re told. Maybe it’s all fiction now. The only way anyone might know the truth is if they had the first book of spells created by La Prima. And I’ve heard tales that the Wicked are searching for it. There may be a spell in it that will allow the devil to break the curse and travel between realms again without needing a witch queen.”

Unease crept through me as I thought about the strange grimoire sheets Vittoria had hidden away under the floorboards. There was no way my sister had found La Prima's missing spell book.

And yet… there was the ancient magic binding her diary that wasn't of this realm. Was the secret location of the first book of spells written within those pages? I'd think it was impossible, but I'd been learning that impossible was another figment of the imagination.

So if it *was* true, then how in the world did my twin find it?

I scooted my chair back from the table and stood. Until I figured out the answers to all of my questions, I didn't want anyone else near Vittoria's diary. If it had a spell the devil was after that could release him from Hell, it was more dangerous than I'd originally feared.

"Will you get the diary for me?"

SEVENTEEN

That night I found the first clue hidden beneath the floorboards in my room. As with most seemingly insignificant details, I'd overlooked the gambling chip when I'd first seen it. I'd been too preoccupied with the diary and strange grimoire sheets to pay much attention to another trinket my sister had collected. Especially something as small and unimportant as a gambling chip.

I carefully flipped the trinket over and read the Latin etched lightly on the back: AVARITIA. Greed. I set the chip down, and stared at the crowned frog stamped onto the front. A month ago I wouldn't have thought much of the crown or the Latin. Now I'd had the misfortune of meeting two of the seven deadly princes of Hell, and I couldn't escape the nagging suspicion that the owner of this gambling chip was another terrifying creature I'd like to avoid.

If he was anything like Envy, I couldn't fathom seeking him out. There was no telling what kind of horror he might try inflicting on me. But… Vittoria must have encountered him if she held on to this chip. Whatever the connection between them, it was important if she left a small piece of him for someone to find. So far, while I hadn't entirely ruled out the possibility of witch hunters being responsible for the murders, I also hadn't come across any solid evidence pointing to them.

For now, I needed to concentrate on this clue and set my other suspicions aside.

I glanced toward my window at the stars winking in and out of the darkness as clouds swept past them. I wished my twin had trusted me with her secrets. But wishes wouldn't get either of us anywhere now—action would. I pulled a piece of parchment out from our shared nightstand and sat with a pen and pot of ink. Writing out things to research more might help reveal another thread for me to pull. The Wicked were a promising lead, but I had a nagging feeling I was missing something.

There had to be a connection tying everything together.

Spelled diary—what magic did Vittoria really use to seal it? how did she find it?

Deal with the devil—why did she agree to become his bride? does it have to do with the curse Claudia mentioned? or did she think she could break it and remain here?

First book of spells—if it belongs to La Prima, how can the Wicked sense it?

Horn of Hades—what is it?a crown? how powerful is it?

Witch hunters—are they involved? if so, are they watching the Wicked, or is there a connection between them and the devil's bargain?

I scanned the notes, nothing stood out. Except… I thought back to when Vittoria first started acting strangely. It had been roughly three weeks before she died. Right around the time of our eighteenth birthday. I'd assumed it had to do with her secret affair with Domenico, but it seemed more likely now that that was when she'd started summoning demons.

One week later, the first murder occurred in Sciacca. Then the first witch in Palermo died a few days after that. Within a week from the second murder, my twin was killed. I didn't know if Wrath would share any detailed information with me about the bargains, but there was a strong possibility that my sister's first summoning correlated to the devil's sudden desire to break the curse.

Maybe her use of demon magic awakened something in the underworld that had long been slumbering. If she'd managed to summon a prince of Hell, anything was possible. Or maybe none of that was true. If she didn't summon a demon or find the first book of spells, maybe she found the Horn of Hades and its discovery set everything into motion.

I pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the theory I'd started with. Witch hunters. They were human, but humans used folk magic as part of their religion throughout the Kingdom of Italy. Perhaps they had some way of being alerted to that kind of dark magic.

I sighed. The witch hunter theory still didn't quite fit, no matter how hard I tried making sense of it. It did, however, look more probable that there was a link between the demons being summoned,

the devil's bargain, and the murders that followed. I'd summoned a prince of Hell, so it was likely Vittoria had accomplished the impossible, too. Which still begged the question of where she'd gotten the summoning spells to begin with. I scribbled another note.

> *Grimoire sheets—was Vittoria summoning a demon to control, or did one of them give her these summoning spells? if so, who and why?*

I stopped writing and carefully considered the last point. What if Vittoria didn't summon a demon first… maybe one was already here, like Wrath. If that demon prince gave my sister the grimoire sheets, did that mean he'd convinced her to help in some wicked scheme? What could a demon prince possibly gain by angering the devil, and slaying his brides? Was it a bid for the dark throne? No matter what secrets my sister kept, I knew with utter certainty that she'd never help someone if they murdered witches.

I picked up the gambling chip, wondering if it wasn't something Vittoria had taken, but something that was gifted to her. Maybe it was a token of good faith, or… I needed to stop speculating and start hunting. I had a new plan for the morning, and it made my stomach twist.

"Have you seen this before?" I flashed the gambling chip at Salvatore. He may have been a mediocre clothing vendor, but he was an extraordinary source of knowledge. I'd gotten up with the sun and rushed out of the house before Nonna interrogated me about the devil again. He might not be chasing me yet, but I was certainly trying to find him and his wretched brothers.

A bead of sweat rolled down my neck after my brisk jog to the market, and I probably looked a little wild with my loose, damp curls. Hopefully Sal wouldn't scrutinize me too closely when there was something much more interesting to pay attention to. Out of anyone in the city, Salvatore was the most reliable gossip.

And the most likely to share every detail he knew with anyone who asked.

"Is that…" He leaned across a pile of folded shirts, squinting. "That's it! That's the club everyone's talking about these days. It's real mysterious. No name, just the crowned frog stamped onto the door. I hear it changes locations and you need one of those chips to get in."

He rummaged through a pile of clothes, and held up a pretty crimson dress. It was one of the finer garments in his stall. I immediately became suspicious. “Trade? I’ll give you this for that. It’s a real bargain.”

“*Grazie.* But I’m going to hang on to it for a while.” I stuck the gambling chip down the front of my bodice. “Do you know the last location of the gambling den?”

“Somewhere near the cathedral, but that was days ago. It’s probably long gone by now. If you don’t have any luck there, ask old man Giovanni, who sells granita near the front entrance. He likes to gamble.”

I decided to try my luck with the cathedral first. I spent a good thirty minutes walking down each alley and side street. I stumbled across a man urinating near a palm tree, but the mysterious gambling den remained hidden. I searched for a few more minutes before seeking out old man Giovanni. A sign on his granita stand was flipped to CLOSED.

Of course. He was probably at the gambling den.

I was about to give up and try my luck elsewhere when I felt the sudden urge to clutch my amulet. Maybe the goddess of death and fury was still guiding my path, or maybe, buried some place deep down where I didn’t want to examine too closely, I sensed the slight lure of demon magic.

I could have sworn I heard a faint humming, guiding my path. I didn’t know if I was losing myself to phantoms, or if it was a latent skill that was emerging each time I held my *cornicello* and concentrated. I didn’t care what the reason was, I only needed to let my instincts guide me.

After a few minutes of wandering down side roads that spiderwebbed away from the cathedral, I stopped in front of a door with a crowned frog burned onto it. I’d done it!

And now I felt a little queasy. I dropped my amulet, and considered my next move. I could turn back, go to Sea & Vine, and forget this nightmare. Leave princes of Hell to someone better equipped with dealing with them. Or I could try to be a little more like Vittoria.

I pulled the gambling chip out from my bodice and held it against the door, praying I wasn’t following a little *too* closely in my sister’s footsteps.

EIGHTEEN

For spells of courage, anoint a red candle with the following items during a waxing moon and burn until flame extinguishes: one part cayenne pepper, one part clove, twice-blessed oil, and a heaping tablespoon of crushed charcoal.

—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire

The door swung open, and I traveled down a creaking set of stairs before entering a subterranean lair. Based on the grimy dead-end entrance, I thought the inside of Greed's den of sin would be dark and derelict. Which was only partly the case. The overcrowded room was indeed dark—brick walls, a gleaming ebony bar that spanned the length of the room, and several velvet-topped tables in deep burgundy dotted the tiled floor.

Each table featured different card games. One colorful round of scopa drew the most attention. Men and women gathered, their gazes fixed on what they hoped was their winning hand. I had a feeling the only true winner was the demon prince in residence.

The gambling den oozed with the promise of riches. Desire for wealth and power was so potent, it almost took physical form. I pictured it reaching for my throat, squeezing until I drew breath in greedy drabs. My attention darted from one sinful tableau to the next.

Greed in its many forms made an appearance. There was greed for power, wealth, attention—excess was the poison of choice here, and patrons couldn't seem to get their fill. I wondered if they knew what time it was, that the sun had just risen and beckoned to them to step outside, to live. Some were haggard, tired, as if they'd been up for days, addicted to whatever their chosen form of greed was. There was also an edge of violence lurking in the atmosphere, like a simple want or desire could twist into something deadly at any moment. It wasn't hard to imagine someone knifing their competition, and taking what they wanted by force.

Sharp gazes cut around the room and I followed the stares. In one corner a man held court with dozens of expensive liquor bottles,

doling out drinks to those who luxuriated in his presence. On the opposite end of the room, men and women slowly removed layers of clothing, swaying their near-naked bodies in hopes of capturing the greedy gazes of those content with watching. Attention was their vice, and, even though it felt wrong to participate in something that was surely enhancing Greed's power, I couldn't stop from indulging in their sultry show.

I shook myself from the trance, and looked for the demon I suspected was around.

A door along the far wall was flanked by scowling guards in fine clothes. I'd wager anything I'd find Greed there. *If* I could make it through the crowded room. There were so many patrons that I had to tread carefully. I tried weaving around groups of people standing behind card players, but barely squeezed through immoveable bodies. Servers carried silver trays overflowing with food and drink, making the progression more difficult than it already was. I managed to shoot between a line of people topping off prosecco glasses before a fight broke out behind me.

Cheers and jeers erupted at the nearest table. I stood on tiptoes and peered past a crowd of people who'd moved in to see what had drawn such a reaction. The door was still impossibly far.

I debated hopping up onto the tables, and running across them when I heard her name—it was a blade to my heart.

"Vittoria!"

I spun slowly, searching for whoever'd called out for my sister. My attention landed on a man around my father's age, half sitting in his chair, half falling to the floor. Gambling chips and empty glasses were stacked in haphazard piles around him. He lifted his gaze, and I drew in a sharp breath. Domenico Nucci Senior.

"Signore Nucci. Do you—"

"Vittoria, be a good girl and see about my drink, will you?" His focus slid to the next card someone slapped down. "Maybe get some of those fried calamari with extra arrabbiata to dip them in, too. It's gonna be another long game. These cheaters are making me feel wolfish."

He smiled like we were sharing some big secret.

"I'm not—I'm Emilia, my sister is…" Signore Nucci was obviously intoxicated and probably thought he was at Sea & Vine, ordering dinner. The spicy marinara and fried octopus were one of our most popular dishes to share. It also explained his confusion over calling me Vittoria—she used to help our father and uncle in the dining room sometimes. "I'll make sure someone brings your food soon."

I turned and smacked into a hard chest. One of the nicely dressed men who'd been guarding the door glared down at me. "The boss

would like a word with you. Come this way."

Whatever pain I'd felt about being mistaken for my sister was immediately replaced with fear. I followed the muscular man as he cleared a path to the door. Power seeped from whatever lay beyond it, and I knew it meant a prince of Hell was in residence. I steeled my buzzing nerves.

The man wasted little time with entertaining my trepidation, and shoved the door open. He barreled into the room without a second glance, and, with little choice, I followed.

"She's here, signore."

I didn't know what I expected to find—maybe a fire-breathing dragon guarding a mountain of gold and jewels, or a really large poisonous frog lashing out with a whiplike tongue covered in spikes—but a lavish room fitted with layered Persian rugs, an oversized desk, plush leather chairs, and a dazzling crystal chandelier wasn't it. Everything was elegant and warm. So very at odds with the shivers running down my back.

The Prince of Greed sat behind the mammoth desk, fingers steepled beneath his chin, a bored look on his finely carved face. He was, in a word, bronzed. From his dark auburn hair to the deep russet of his eyes, he reminded me of copper coins melted and recast in a humanoid form. If he had a dagger like Envy and Wrath, he'd hidden it well. Which made me trust him even less.

"I wasn't anticipating this meeting, but I am pleased nonetheless." He smiled. There was something off about it. Something not quite natural. "Please, sit."

He motioned to one of the chairs in front of him, but I lingered near the door. Either his powers were greatly diminished despite the greed pouring from his gambling den, or he'd tamped them down for this meeting. A demon game—feigning weakness to lure in prey, though, in this room he didn't really seem to hide who he was or where he was from.

Two demon guards stood behind him with their arms crossed, growling deep in their throats. One had pale green reptile skin and matching eyes. And the other was covered in short fur—similar to a deer, and had liquid ebony eyes. Two antlers curled up and away from the top of the fur-covered demon's head. It was disconcerting, seeing something that almost looked human with the skin and eyes of an animal. I tried to convince myself to cross the room, but couldn't force my body to carry me anywhere near those demons. "I…"

Greed's attention slowly shifted from me to what had caught my eye. He snapped his fingers and the room cleared. When he looked at me again, there was a hunger in his gaze—one that spoke of possession. He didn't want to seduce me, he wanted to *own* me. I

wouldn't be a trophy to him like Envy, I'd be a tool for power.

"Emilia. Please," he nodded to the unoccupied chair, "no one will harm you while you're here. You have my word."

Said the wolf to the little hen. His use of my name unnerved me, but I managed my best impression of a confident stride and sat down. "Did my sister tell you my name?"

"No. You did. Pardon my rudeness, but I have informants stationed throughout the club. They heard your exchange with one of my regular customers." His smile was almost convincing this time. I wondered if he sensed my fear and adjusted his responses accordingly. That thought brought on a new rush of nerves I didn't need. Being alone with Greed was a terribly rash idea, but I really couldn't think of a better way to get information from him. "Vittoria didn't mention you at all, actually. This is quite a surprise."

He poured two glasses of water from a pitcher I hadn't noticed and slid one to me. Crowned frogs were etched onto the glasses. I accepted the water, but didn't drink. "Why a frog?"

"They're greedy creatures. Content with neither land nor water, they desire both."

Made sense. In a demon logic sort of way. "Did Vittoria summon you?"

"You're full of questions." He studied me closely. "It's strange… how identical you are."

His tone didn't hold any clues to his emotions. It was a statement of fact. Nothing more. He didn't seem to mind one way or the other that my sister was dead.

"I know my sister came here before she was murdered. I want to know why. What did she want from you?"

"Hmmm. Right for the jugular. A bold move, little mouse." He leaned back, his gaze sharp, calculating. I did my best not to squirm under his scrutiny. "It seems I have valuable information that you'd like. And you, Signorina di Carlo, also have something of great value to me. I will answer your questions to the best of my ability, only in exchange for your amulet."

My hand automatically moved to my *cornicello*. "Why do you want it?"

"Do you know what it is?"

"A folk charm to ward off the evil eye." Unlike Malocchio charms humans wore, it would also bring the world into eternal twilight if I brought it together with my sister's amulet, according to Nonna. I decided to keep that to myself, in case he started drooling on his finely trimmed suit.

"Mmh." Greed removed a velvet pouch from the desk drawer, and dropped a necklace into his palm—a gold chain with a ruby the size of

a quail egg that twinkled in the light. A strange essence came off it, almost like a high-keening wail in the distance, setting my teeth on edge.

I wanted him to put it back where he'd found it. Immediately. "What is that?"

"It's called the Eye of Darkness, and it grants whoever wears it true protection from creatures of malevolent intent. Give me your amulet, and it's yours."

A gift like that didn't come without a price. "What else do you want?"

"For you to join yourself to House Greed."

I stared at Greed and I swore my skin physically tried to crawl away from my body in protest as he gazed back. He was classically handsome, but there was something off about him. His eyes were void of human emotion. He looked alien and wrong. I couldn't imagine my sister falling in love or even lust with him. Which meant her reason for coming here was not a result of seduction. He had information she wanted. And I wanted to know what it was.

"Why do you want me to align myself with you?"

"Because I believe you'll be very useful to me in the future. If you become queen, you'll owe me a favor. A powerful one, too, if this charm ends up saving your life."

Greed didn't strike me as a betting kind of creature, which made me even more hesitant to accept this little present. I had no plans of becoming Queen of the Wicked, and would be damned if I gave him a reason to help put me on that dark throne.

"Did you offer the Eye of Darkness to my sister?"

"Accept my bargain and find out."

"If you won't answer simple questions, I'm afraid we're through." I stood, ready to be as far away from this prince and place as possible, when his chair scraped across the floor.

"Wait." He sat back down and put the ruby necklace in its pouch again. Some of the unease in my shoulders loosened. "In a show of good faith, I will answer *one* of your questions."

"In exchange for…"

"Nothing. You have my word. Remember, the offer is for one question, anything else will cost you."

I reclaimed my seat, calculating my next move. There were so many questions I needed answers to, but none of them would be worth the cost of handing over my *cornicello*. I thought carefully about the list I'd written out last night, and focused on one detail that bothered me the most. It meant something. I wanted to know what. I chose my words with exacting precision.

"Tell me about the Horn of Hades."

If he was surprised by my choice, it didn't show. "It's a key that locks the gates of Hell."

"I heard it was part of a curse. That if a witch wears it she'll have power over the devil."

"Witch legends are fascinating in their falsehoods. The Horn of Hades was a gift. Your sister knew the true story."

I desperately wanted to ask him what it was, but there was something more important I needed to know. "How do you break a demon spell that was cast on an object?"

Greed's answering smile was toxic. "I told you about the Horn of Hades. The rest will cost you. I don't believe in giving without gain."

Now my smile turned sharp. "Per your rules, that was my first actual question."

He rolled his shoulders back, his nostrils flaring a bit. I was half convinced he was about to spring across the desk and wrap his hands around my neck. A long moment passed before he spoke.

"Clever girl." He reached for his glass and drank deeply, his knuckles turning white while he probably thought over my phrasing. "Sacrifice a bit of yourself."

"That's not an honest answer."

"Oh, but it is."

Greed took another sip of water. "Would you like to ask another question?"

I would like to ask another dozen questions, but dragging useful information from a prince of Hell was harder than I thought. I pressed my lips together.

He kicked his boots up onto the desk, and steepled his fingers again. "Allow me to be blunt, Signorina di Carlo. Your sister gave me her amulet, knowing the importance of it. I need both hers and yours to work a spell. Give me your amulet, and I vow to protect your world."

Sure he would. Right after he pillaged and destroyed it. Suspicion coiled around me. There was absolutely no way my sister had willingly given him her *cornicello*. If he did have it, then he'd taken it. I knew for a fact Vittoria had been wearing it the day she died. I swallowed hard. It was looking more and more possible that I was sitting across from my twin's murderer. I mentally crossed witch hunters off my list of suspects. Thus far, all of my clues kept pointing to demons.

I wondered if Greed told my sister a similar story and she refused him. I was more than a little afraid of what he might do if I also tried walking away. He could probably sense fear, so I shoved it as far down inside me as I could, and bluffed. "If Vittoria gave you her amulet, show it to me."

“Ah.” He blew out a long breath. “That isn’t possible.”

“Not possible, or you won’t do it?”

“Both. A Viperidae was summoned to this realm. Its nest is below the cathedral and, well, they’re very protective about their space. The amulet will stay there until it decides to give it up.”

I didn’t bother asking what a Viperidae was, or who’d summoned it. I doubted he’d tell me anything else after I’d tricked information from him.

“And you put the amulet there…” I didn’t expect an answer and he didn’t offer one. It was highly unlikely that he would put something he wanted so badly in a place he couldn’t gain access to it. But I had a feeling my sister would. I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Vittoria would never willingly give anyone—let alone one of the Malvagi—her amulet.

Greed’s story didn’t add up. I wanted to hope against all odds he was being semi-truthful, but it was a gamble I couldn’t risk taking. He did give me another short-term goal to focus on—I’d get my sister’s *cornicello* back, and ask Nonna why a demon would be so interested in them.

“Well?” he asked. “Do we have a deal, Signorina di Carlo?”
“*Grazie,*” I said, standing, “but my answer is still no.”

NINETEEN

A prince of Hell is the most dangerous of the demons. He appears angelic, but will claw out your heart. To combat his power, wear or draw a cimaruta charm—a branch of a rue with five stalks sprouting designs that correlate to your needs. Choose five images needed to banish a demon prince back to his realm. Example: a key, dagger, owl, snake, and moon will send him straight to Hell.

—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire

Blood was the key to unlocking demon magic.

I'd been thinking about Greed's seemingly innocuous answer all afternoon, and puzzle pieces slowly clicked into place. I tallied up a few instances where blood had been integral with demon magic. In order to summon a demon, I needed to offer blood in sacrifice.

Then there was Wrath and his blood trade. The supposed blood debt Nonna mentioned.

I tried and failed to hide my repulsion. Would it be too much for demons to accept a bit of wine instead? I sighed and pricked my finger with a pin, letting a single drop splatter onto Vittoria's diary. Breath held, I stared at it intently, waiting for some sign the spell held or disintegrated.

There was no cataclysmic event or flash of lightning. One minute I couldn't open it, and the next I could. I hesitated with the spine half cracked. I'd been trying to get into this diary for so long, and now I was a little afraid of what I was going to find. This might reveal my sister's murderer. The more I learned, the more I doubted witch hunters. Demon princes were taking the lead as the most likely to commit murder. But if the devil needed a witch, it didn't quite make sense for them to thwart his efforts. Which meant someone in our circle might have been responsible. I shivered in place. It was easy to think she'd been killed by a demon, but the thought of it being someone she knew…

I took a deep breath and began reading Vittoria's most private

thoughts.

The first several pages were dedicated to the perfumes she'd crafted. A few random spells, or charms for Moon Blessings and luck. A sketch or two of a *cimaruta* and a few other symbols I didn't recognize. I paused on a page where she'd written down one of Claudia's scrying sessions in great detail. I was about to scan the opposite page when something caught my eye. A tiny, almost insignificant note she'd left for herself.

> *Am I hearing magical objects, or the souls attached to them over time? Sometimes the whispers are louder, clear. Other times they're frantic and hard to understand. Similar to Claudia's scrying, or different?*

Hearing magical objects? I stared at the line, unblinking. I had to be misunderstanding somehow. Vittoria never mentioned this ability before. We told each other everything. I was her twin, her other half—but then again, I'd never told her about the *luccicare,* either.

I turned over the events of the night when we were eight. It was highly probable that she'd developed some latent ability, too. I had. Though I had believed I was an anomaly because I'd been the one holding both of our amulets. I hadn't confided in my sister because I didn't want her to worry about the repercussions, or blame herself since it had been her idea.

I quickly turned to the next page, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. No clue to her magic. I flipped to another, and another. I'd gotten to the middle of her journal before finding another passage about the strange, secret magic.

> *I was out near the sea collecting shells and sea salt when I heard it. It started as a whisper, frantic, too low to hear clearly. I set my basket down and clutched my cornicello, which seemed to help me focus on the voice. Voices. There were many. And they were speaking all at once. They begged me to come help. They said the time was upon us. I followed the whispers until they turned to chatter, indistinct and out of sequence—like they were speaking in tongues. It reminded me of old Sofia Santorini. Of the time her mind got trapped between*

realms. I wanted to walk away, to run back and get Emilia, but something warned me not to. I followed the hum of voices into a cave, high above the sea. I don't know why, but I dropped to my knees and started digging. I found it there, buried deep within the earth. I managed to understand one line before it descended into chaos.

Unfortunately, my twin didn't write down the line she'd heard. I exhaled loudly, hands shaking as I flipped through the rest of the diary. There wasn't any other passage about the mysterious "it" she'd found buried beneath the earth. I scanned doodles of flowers and hearts, Claudia's dreams, and all of the questions Vittoria had recorded the answers to.

I couldn't bring myself to read the part about what ended up being our last night in the world together. So far there were no names, no people she'd mistrusted, or demons she'd struck bargains with. How she'd ended up agreeing to marry—my attention fastened onto something that made my palms dampen.

I didn't plan on listening to it again. I'd already decided to hide it, far from where they could ever find it. Then it whispered something that sounded a lot like nonsense, but my blood prickled. The Horn of Hades is a key to locking the gates of Hell, but, according to it, what it really is, is two somethings. They are the devil's horns, cut off by his own hand. I held my cornicello, feeling the truth in the hum and whispers. The root of my power. Emilia and I, for reasons I am unsure of, have been wearing the devil's horns our whole lives.

So if that's true, how did they find their way to us?

I slowly closed the diary and exhaled. Holy goddess. The devil's horns. It was hard to believe and yet… I knew it was true. We'd been wearing the Horn of Hades our whole lives. No wonder Greed was so interested in our amulets—I couldn't even begin to imagine the damage that he could cause if he managed to get his hands on them both. I shoved that destruction from my mind and read over the last line my sister wrote again. It was an excellent question. One I fully

intended to get the answer to immediately.

"It's about time you tore yourself away from dark pursuits, bambina. Your mother and father are sick with worry." Nonna eyed me from the rocking chair she'd dragged across from the simmering cauldron. Spell candles for peace and restful slumber burned all around her. "All day, petrified you were lying somewhere with your heart ripped out, alone. Like your sister. Do you have any idea what you put us through?"

I did. And I hated it, but I wasn't the only di Carlo who had explaining to do. I moved fully into the kitchen and laid Wrath's dagger and then my *cornicello* on the island. "Is this one of the devil's horns?" Nonna's face paled. "Have we been wearing the Horn of Hades?"

"Don't be silly. Who filled your head with these stories?" Nonna got up and walked over to the cauldron, added a sprinkle of herbs and stirred them into her newest essence. It smelled of spruce and mint. I wondered where she got the evergreen, but didn't ask. "We don't believe in such things, bambina."

"A Viperidae was summoned, and is guarding Vittoria's amulet."

She stopped stirring the mixture. "It's true, then. The Malvagi have returned."

I waited for her to start muttering protection charms, or rush around the house, checking all the windows and doors for herbs and garlands of garlic she'd hung to keep wicked things out. She didn't ask me to grab olive oil and a bowl of water to make sure evil wasn't in our home this very moment. This calm, collected version of my grandmother was completely foreign to me. For as long as I could remember, she'd worried about the devil and his soul-stealing demons.

Human children had nursery rhymes, but we'd been taught about the seven demon princes and the four—in particular—di Carlos should fear the most. I hadn't forgotten that Wrath had been named. Nor had I figured out if he was the one who'd crave my blood, capture my heart, steal my soul, or take my life. Honestly, I could picture him fulfilling any of them.

My grandma moved the wooden spoon around the boiling mixture, her attention stubbornly fixed on its ornately carved handle, and said nothing. Of course now that all of the nightmarish stories were coming to life, she stayed silent.

"Nonna, you have to tell me about the Horn of Hades. Vittoria knew about it, and she was killed. *Please*. If you don't want that to be my fate, too, you need to tell me what it is and why we're wearing it. I deserve to know."

She stared into the cauldron and sighed.

"Dark days are upon us. It's time to be a warrior of the light." Nonna left her essences and removed a pitcher of wine from our sideboard. She poured herself a glass of chianti, then sat in her rocker. "I never wanted it to come to this, child. But the hands of Fate work their own magic. Who are we but puppets on their cosmic strings?"

Cryptic as usual. I decided to start with the smaller details, and work my way up to the harder questions. "Is it really a key for locking the gates of Hell?"

"Yes and no. It has the ability to open and close the gates, but that's not all it does."

"Are they the devil's horns?"

"Yes."

"And you've known the whole time?"

Nonna nodded. I stared at her, trying to process the fact that my grandmother—who'd been making us bless our charms to protect ourselves from the demon princes our entire lives—had placed such things around our necks. "La Prima cast a spell that turned them into two smaller amulets, hoping to hide them from all who'd seek them."

"Because they belong to the devil?"

"Because if brought together, they not only have the ability to lock the gates, they can also summon him. They grant the summoner a certain bit of power over him."

I stared at the amulet I'd worn for as long as I could remember, wondering why my sister hadn't come to Nonna when she'd found this out. I still had so many questions about her bargain. If we had a means of controlling the devil, why didn't she just ask me for my *cornicello*?

It made sense why Greed was after it; his sin was closely tied to power. But if all princes of Hell craved power why, then, didn't Wrath try to snatch my *cornicello*?

Something Envy said resurfaced amidst my confusion. "What's a shadow witch?"

Nonna made a disgusted sound. "Shadow witches are what demons call us. We are known as *Stelle Streghe*."

Star witches. "*We* are known? Since when are we known as Star Witches?"

Nonna gave me a sardonic look. "Since the dawn of our bloodline. We hail from an ancient line of witches who had ties to the Wicked prior to the curse. We were guardians in a sense, ensuring creatures of the underworld remained there, never interfering with the human world. For a time we worked beside the Malvagi. That was before—"

Nonna's wineglass flew across the room and shattered against the wall. Chianti dripped like blood. I screamed, but not because of the

glass. A floating blade hovered against my grandmother's throat. My ghost demon was back, and it didn't seem like just a figment of my imagination now. It had been quiet the last few days, and I'd forgotten it. Now it was hard to ignore Wrath's serpent dagger as it glinted in the light.

"Little tricksy witch."

The demon's blade pressed into Nonna's skin. I shook my head and stepped forward. "Please. If this is about what I did to Greed, she has nothing to do with it. Leave her alone, she's innocent."

"Innocent?" It accentuated the "c" until it sounded like a hiss. "She is no such thing."

Before I could dash across the room and knock Nonna away, her head jerked back and the invisible hand dragged Wrath's blade across her throat. Blood gushed from her wound. She gurgled, the sound one of the most horrendous things I'd ever heard. The weapon clattered to the ground. I watched everything happen as if it occurred in slow increments.

A window burst open, and I imagined the invisible demon fled through it.

Then reality crashed into me and I was in motion. I was across the room a breath later.

"No!" I snatched a cloth from the counter and held it to her neck, stanching the blood. Then I screamed until my voice broke, rousing the whole house from the spelled slumber Nonna had enchanted them with. There were spells to help slow the flow of blood, but I couldn't think of any through the panic screeching at me. It was as if my mind shut down and all I could focus on was one basic need: hold the wound.

My mother rushed into the kitchen first, her attention immediately falling on Nonna. And the growing lake of blood. Tears streamed down my face, blurring my vision.

I would not let my grandmother die. Not like this.

My father appeared a minute later, his eyes widening at the sight. "I'll get bandages."

I stopped paying attention to anything other than keeping the cloth pressed firmly against my grandmother's wound. Time ticked by. Blood saturated the cotton, my mother prayed over a thick herbal paste she'd made. I held firmly. I wanted to be the kind of person who didn't panic and could act calmly. But logic didn't penetrate my terror. Mamma tried yanking my hands away, but I refused to budge. I had to keep applying pressure. Nonna needed me.

"It's all right, baby. Let me get this on her. It'll seal the wound."

"I can't."

"You can. It's all right."

It took another bit of coaxing, but I finally relinquished my grip. Nonna slid to the ground, her breathing labored. I'd seen this in injured animals before and it wasn't a good sign.

My mother slathered the thick paste across the injury, then wrapped one of the clean bandages around it. My father had brought them in before he went to work checking for any more intruders and securing our window. My mother finished tying it off with a prayer to the goddess of good health and well-being to heal Nonna quickly. I offered up a prayer of my own, hoping she listened to us both.

"Help me get her into bed, Emilia."

I swiped at my tears and did as I was asked. Once we'd laid her across the mattress, my mother pulled up a chair to watch. I sat against the wall and stayed there until the sun set, turning the room bruised shades of purple and black. Nonna's breathing finally evened out, and she fell into a deep, restorative sleep. She'd made it, no thanks to me. Praise the goddess.

"You should go get some rest, baby. Your grandmother will be fine. The worst is over."

I nodded, but couldn't sleep now. I wasn't sure I could ever rest again without seeing the gory scene replay in my mind. And the worst part was, Nonna was almost killed because of me. Then, when she needed me the most, I'd failed her again. I'd lost all memories of spells or healing charms. I'd shut down and let fear take control. If I hadn't started investigating my sister's murder, or tricked Greed, none of this would have happened.

I crept into the kitchen, wanting to clean up the blood before my parents saw it again. I scrubbed until the floor shined and my fingers ached. Then I repeated the routine. Pouring water, scrubbing. I needed to remove the stains from the grout. It took most of the night, but I finally managed to erase all physical signs of the attack. But the memory would never leave me.

I rinsed out the rag and leaned against the island, sipping a glass of water. It took a while for me to notice at first, but eventually I realized the invisible demon came here with a mission. I absently reached up, thinking of Nonna's injury, and went to hold my amulet. My hand dropped away, empty. I forgot I'd taken it off. I went to pluck it off the counter and froze.

My *cornicello* was gone.

TWENTY

"**You look like** hell, witch."

I glared at the demon of war by way of greeting. In a few short hours he'd be free, and I wasn't sure he'd answer any questions once the containment spell dissipated. After the brutal attack on Nonna, I left the house and wandered around Palermo, deciding what to do next. I'd made a terrible mistake and it almost cost my grandmother her life. I shouldn't have ever gone back to my house after confronting Greed. Of course he'd send spies after me to steal my amulet. It was reckless to think a prince of Hell would simply let me walk away unscathed after besting him.

Now that I knew my sister and I had been wearing the devil's horns, and how powerful and dangerous they were, I had to get them back. I might not know where mine was at the moment, but thanks to Greed, I knew exactly where Vittoria's was. I just needed some information from Wrath about the Viperidae first, and then I'd set out to retrieve it.

"You'd know better than most what that's like." I smiled sweetly. "I met two of your brothers, by the way. They're absolute gems."

Wrath looked neither surprised nor interested in the news. He sat with his back against the wall, legs straight out, surveying the circle of bones that contained him. Of course he wasn't wearing the shirt I'd bought for him; it was lying in a discarded heap on the ground.

"I have six brothers. You'll have to be more specific."

"Don't you know who's here?"

His attention subtly dropped to my hip before he jerked his gaze back up. "Have you come crawling back to beg for help? I'm not feeling very charitable today. Captivity doesn't suit me."

Demons invading my city, attacking my grandmother, stealing my *cornicello,* and murdering my sister didn't suit me, either. Instead of arguing, I pulled a cannoli from the brown paper bag I'd tucked into my satchel. Nonna said you could catch more flies with honey than vinegar. I figured a cannoli would help me catch a prince of Hell just fine.

He looked startled when I handed it to him. “What is that?”

“Food. Unless you’ve been catching vermin, I doubt you’ve eaten.”

“I neither need human food, nor do I wish to taint my body with the foulness of it.”

I stared at him, horrified. After all the terrible things that had happened, this was putting me over the edge. “You really are a monster, aren’t you?”

“That doesn’t even look edible.” He took the cannoli between his two fingers and held it closer to inspect it. “What do you expect me to do with it?”

“Engage your enemies.”

He poked at the ricotta filling. “Is it poisoned?”

I sighed. “Just eat it, oh, mighty warrior. It’s for pleasure, not pain. I made them myself. I swear they’re not poisoned. This time.”

He looked skeptical, but took a bite. His attention flicked to mine as he chewed. I couldn’t help but grin as he took a larger mouthful, then grabbed a second cannoli from the bag. He was halfway through it when he noticed me still watching and scowled. “What?”

“I do not wish to taint my body with the foulness of human food,” I mocked. “But desserts are acceptable.”

He didn’t deign to respond. Instead he rummaged in the bag, frowning at the emptiness. He set it aside and looked me over again. “I imagine these delicacies were part of a larger scheme to infiltrate my defenses. You smell like blood that isn’t your own, your hair is tangled like some wild creature built a nest in it and invited its kin. My blade is missing from your hip. And you look ready to curse the world. What is it you desire to know, witch? What scared you?”

My hand moved to the place I’d been strapping his dagger. After the damage it had inflicted on my grandmother, I couldn’t stand the thought of holding it. Now I felt its absence almost as much as I missed my *cornicello.* “How would someone summon a Viperidae?”

“Someone with a sense of survival wouldn’t.”

“Maybe someone immortal and arrogant already did.”

“Doubtful.” Wrath wasn’t amused with my assessment of demon royalty. “Viperidae are unique creatures. If they choose to guard something, or bring it into their nest, no denizen of the underworld may interfere. They must choose to give it up on their own.”

I made a mental notation to bring him dessert anytime I wanted information. He was downright pleasant and chatty. “What does it look like?”

“Its namesake. Like a viper, it’s got long, hinged fangs. It also happens to be larger than I am and is twice as deadly. Very few antidotes exist if someone is bitten. And the ones that do exist aren’t to be taken lightly. There’s a cost for using them, like all magic. Make

your own choice, but know you may not survive to see another sunrise if you disturb one."

I rubbed at my arm, not because his warning frightened me, but because there was an annoying sensation burrowing beneath my skin. Like someone was scratching back and forth over the same section with a pin. Wrath tracked the movement and then glanced at his own arm.

It seemed our tattoos were transforming once again. Winding around the serpents—which I noted Wrath now sported around his twin crescent moons, too—were wildflowers.

Before my eyes, my snakes were given shimmering, even scales. I didn't want to think it was beautiful, but it was. Undeniably so. Wrath curled his hand into a fist. I couldn't tell if it was because of the pain, or because of our strange, ever-changing ink. I decided not to press the issue; I had one more question for the demon before I left on my mission.

"If someone was to attack a Viperidae, what sort of spell might they use?"

He dragged his attention from the magical ink on his arm, his look a study of resignation. "No one should be attacking a Viperidae. But, if someone was a foolish witch with a death wish, then that witch might try casting a sleeping spell. It might be the only way to sneak around it."

"I…" I stopped myself from thanking him. If it wasn't for him and his cruel brothers, my entire family wouldn't be in this mess. I inhaled deeply, thinking about the sleep spell. It was simple. I liked simple plans. It meant there was less that could potentially go wrong.

"One final word of caution." Wrath pushed himself up from the ground and moved to where I stood near the edge of the bone circle. I ignored the expanse of toned, golden skin in my face. "Freedom will be mine soon. If you are foolish enough to attack such a creature, I will not come for you."

I stared up at him. "Good."

Last month if someone told me I'd *choose* to wander through forgotten tunnels beneath the cathedral alone, tracking down an ancient snake demon guarding one half of a sacred key that not only locked the gates of Hell but were actually the horns of the devil, I'd think they needed medical attention.

Emilia Maria di Carlo didn't do danger. My sister was the adventurous one—I was satisfied with safe, clean fun. Give me a steamy romance novel with forbidden love and impossible odds.

That was the kind of adventure I could get behind.

A little more than a month ago I would've laughed with my sister over the possibility that something like a giant, netherworldly snake even *existed,* thinking Nonna's superstitions were hard at work again. Even with magic running through my veins, I never fully believed in the stories she told us; they were too fantastical. Immortal, blood-drinking creatures like the Wicked couldn't be real.

Now I knew better. Every tall tale was rooted in truth.

I followed a strange, foul egg odor and bits of snakeskin that had been shed, wishing I'd gotten over my aversion to Wrath's dagger and had taken it with me. Light from grates above dappled the ground every once in a while, but I traveled mostly in darkness.

I paid attention to the slightest shift in the atmosphere, allowing my senses to guide me. I had a suspicion the demon wouldn't want to draw attention to itself or its precious treasure.

Plus, I already had a good idea where its nest was—Greed said it was under the cathedral, and I was quickly approaching the turnoff for it. I paused at the corner and collected myself.

I'd been mentally running through my plan, and now that I was almost facing my enemy, it seemed like it was much too simple to actually work. Maybe Wrath had decided to send me to my death armed with an impossible scheme. Diabolical demon.

I drew in a deep breath. I could do this. But I needed to move quickly. The longer I stood around, debating, the more my fear grew. I imagined what my sister would do if she were here instead. She'd charge in to save the day—like she tried doing when she'd agreed to the devil's bargain. Granted, that didn't turn out to be the wisest decision, but at least she was brave enough to *try*. Compared to what she'd done, casting a simple sleep spell and retrieving a necklace was easy.

I exhaled slowly and peered around the corner. Amber-colored light spilled into the chamber from above, illuminating the snake-shaped demon. Wrath hadn't exaggerated—the Viperidae was bigger than he was. Oil-slick midnight scales covered a body coiled in the center of the tunnel. Even curled up, the demon took up most of the space; its prone form was taller than me by a good head or more. When it was alert and upright… I didn't want to think about facing something like that.

I pulled a handful of dried chamomile leaves from my skirt pocket, offered them to the goddess of night and slumber, and whispered, *"Somnum."*

Steady breathing indicated the beast was now in a deep slumber, a gift from the goddess. I exhaled. Now I just had to find the amulet and sneak back out the way I'd come. The Viperidae faced the

opposite direction, and its head was easily twice the size of our biggest oven. I didn't have to see its fangs to know they'd skewer me with one bite.

I scanned the nest and almost whooped with victory when I spotted a familiar horn-shaped object. My sister's amulet glinted on the ground next to the beast. As luck would have it, the *cornicello* was on my side of the tunnels. It seemed like it should be fairly easy to sneak over, grab it, and retreat without waking the demon. I looked around, cataloguing every exit I could make out in the dim light. Two more tunnels formed offshoots in a *Y* layout. Easy.

And it would have been, if it wasn't for all the pebbles and debris littered on the ground. One small misstep and, regardless of the sleep spell, the Viperidae would be on me in an instant. I gave one last prayer to a goddess I hoped was listening, and took the first step into the tunnel.

I didn't so much as breathe too deeply, fearful of making the slightest sound. Unnatural silence blanketed the chamber like freshly fallen snow. Once, when we were little, Nonna brought us to a cabin in northern Italy where we met one of her friends. I was too young to remember what the exact circumstances were, but I never forgot the smothering quiet of snow.

I was more than halfway to the amulet when I noticed the beast had stopped breathing evenly. I paused, foot midair, and waited for death. The trouble with sleep spells was, there was no way to prevent someone or something from waking normally.

When the Viperidae didn't move, I decided to finish what I'd started. If it was lingering somewhere between sleeping and wakefulness, it wouldn't remain that way forever. My attention split between it and the ground, careful to not make any noise. I didn't so much as allow one pebble to skitter out of place.

Finally, after what felt like a thousand cursed years, I reached the amulet and slowly, painstakingly, bent to retrieve it. I kept my eyes on the demon, which turned out to be a terrible mistake. The instant my fingers clasped the *cornicello,* the chain swished across the ground.

The Viperidae struck.

Its tail whipped out, knocking me off my feet in one quick blow. I gripped Vittoria's amulet with one hand, and a handful of dirt and pebbles in the other. I waited until the demon was almost on me before tossing the debris in its eyes. The Viperidae released a multilayered scream that sent chills racing down my spine.

Holy goddess above… I'd *really* pissed it off. The snakelike demon coiled in and around itself, screeching and thrashing. Chunks of stone fell from the walls in an avalanche of chaos. Dust clouds filled the air, choking me. One tunnel was now completely sealed off. I had to get

out of there immediately, but couldn't.

I huddled as far away from the demon as possible, trying to crawl along the wall. It was moving too quickly, and I couldn't chance getting hit with its tail.

It wouldn't be long before it worked the grit from its eyes. The Viperidae's powerful body crashed into the tunnel on the right, and I didn't waste my only opportunity for escape. I shot past it, heart hammering, praying it didn't swing back around and clip me. I took my first step into the tunnel I'd used to get here when it happened.

A fang the size of a sword pierced the fleshy part on my lower back. The bite was lightning fast—over and done with before I could scream. I stopped moving, my whole body prickled and went ice cold. I knew enough of herbal folk medicine to know the signs of shock. Major trauma sometimes took a few seconds to catch up to nerve receptors in the brain. Just as I'd thought it, the pain hit me a beat later. Hot, searing, all-consuming.

I dropped to the ground and turned in time to see the Viperidae closing in for the kill. I rolled a second before it tore out my throat. The sudden movement made my wound split wider and throb. Blood splattered around me, and I did my best to not focus on the possibility that the demon had already struck a death blow. It came for me again, and this time, I let it get close enough to see my reflection in its slitted eyes. I shoved the screaming pain aside, heart pounding. I waited… waited… it lowered its head, ready to sink its fangs—

I struck hard and fast, shoving Vittoria's amulet into one of its eyes. Warm liquid gushed over my hands, as the Viperidae shrieked one last time. I shoved harder, until I was almost certain I'd pierced its brain.

I didn't wait to see if it was dead or badly injured—I turned and fled.

For a little while, anyway. The venom had other plans for me.

TWENTY-ONE

Everything spun wildly—like the few times I'd mistakenly had too much wine with Claudia and Vittoria. I staggered back down the tunnel and collapsed under the grate I'd snuck in through. Escape was so close, yet impossibly far. I needed to gather my strength and drag myself up; and vowed to do just that…

… once my head stopped spinning and the nausea passed.

A soft thud landed near me, followed by a series of exquisitely foul curses. If I wasn't convinced opening my mouth would bring on the vomit I was barely suppressing, I'd have laughed over the colorful litany. I couldn't exactly remember his name at the moment, but I recalled he wasn't normally prone to such outbursts. For some reason, the situation struck me as funny when it was anything but.

My head suddenly ached—the pain sharp and vicious. It felt like a thousand needles were pricking my brain simultaneously. I groaned, which only made it worse.

"Where are you hurt?" His voice was too loud. I batted him away, but he was an annoyingly persistent devil. "Focus! Did it bite you, witch?"

"Stop."

Fingers probed my skull, my throat, then hesitated at my neckline. Somehow I'd managed to loop the *cornicello* over my head. He rolled me onto my side, and I nearly passed out from the next wave of agony. He clearly didn't care about my pain and suffering. Maybe he enjoyed it. I vaguely recalled hating him. Now I knew why.

He paused for less than a heartbeat, then the sound of fabric tearing was followed by a blast of ice down my back. Air battered against my ripped flesh, the pain absolutely blinding in its fury. I think I might have screamed.

"Shit."

Two solid arms hoisted me up, caging me against a body that had to be made of steel, not muscle and bone. We started moving swiftly, his steps fluid and graceful. Which was a good thing—if he bounced while running, I'd throw up all over him. I didn't think he'd like that.

Wind whipped at my hair—we were traveling at an impossible speed through city streets. I made the mistake of looking at buildings flashing by once, and instantly regretted it. I nestled against his warm chest and squeezed my eyes shut. Pain was all I knew.

"We're almost there."

My teeth chattered uncontrollably. I had no idea where *there* was, but hoped it had blankets and a fire. A coldness was spreading through me, all-consuming and terrible. I had the worst feeling I'd never know the comfort of warmth again. Which was strange, since I thought the day had been especially hot. Icy numbness slowly spread up my legs. A door clattered open, then slammed shut. It felt like we ran up a set of stairs and then I was laid onto a soft mattress.

Shouts rang out around me. Muffled voices were hard to distinguish. Water splashing into a basin overtook my senses, followed by the unmistakable scent of smoke. I thrashed. Somewhere, deep in my memory, I knew what the smoke meant. Danger.

"Don't worry." Another voice. Male. Unfamiliar. "He knows what to do and will be back soon." Blankets tucked me in so tightly, I could barely breathe. I must have gasped; warm hands were on my forehead. "Shhh. Don't struggle. It makes the venom spread faster."

Time narrowed into the smallest fraction of itself. I knew nothing but random seconds, and unrelenting agony. My heartbeat was so loud, it made my head pound. Moments passed. Pain persisted. Then a crackling fire, the scent of smoke, and he was back, prying my eyes open.

"I'll fix this. But you have to grant me permission. Do you?"

I tried to nod, but could barely move. He crouched beside me, placed his hands on either side of my head, and repeated the question. He must have felt the nearly imperceptible movement this time—before the next wave of pain struck, he was a blur of action.

"Watch the perimeter and do not interrupt us, no matter what," he barked at someone I couldn't see. Panic set in again. Perimeter? Was I in Hell? He scooped me up, a door shut behind us, and his voice turned noticeably gentler. "I need to get us both into the water, all right?"

I tried to say yes, but the numbness spread to my throat. I think he saw the answer in my face anyway. It sounded like he whispered, "Live long enough to hate me for this."

The next thing I felt was warmth—like I was floating on a cloud near the sun. Words in a language I didn't understand were spoken at my ear. Lips brushed against my skin, one of the last pleasant sensations I experienced before darkness closed in.

"Drink."

I wanted to, more than anything, but couldn't. He tilted my head

back, parted my lips and poured nectar down my throat. I tried thrashing against the cloying taste of it, so sweet and thick that I almost choked, but I'd long since lost the ability to move on my own.

A tear slipped down my cheek and strong fingers brushed it away. Water splashed. A different kind of warmth encompassed me. Soft, gentle lips met mine. It was a whisper, a promise, an unbreakable vow. It shattered the pain and felt like home. I think I wanted more, but was denied. He quietly chanted, his words foreign.

Brilliant light flashed and then my true hell began.

A soft sound roused me from the worst dream I'd ever had. I cracked an eye and kept my breathing deep and even. I was soaking in a tub. For a second, I had no idea how I'd gotten here.

Then flashes came to me. I couldn't tell if they were dreams or memories.

A metallic snake inked onto an arm banded around my body—not in possession, but solidarity. Like Wrath had followed me into my nightmare, battled Death, and dragged me out.

At some point, I thought his tongue flicked over my jugular, tracing an invisible *S* along my skin. I remembered the feeling of every nerve ending, every molecule sizzling, instantly attuned to where I wanted those lips to move next. I swore I still felt heat lingering from the brief contact. I was surprised that I didn't hate it.

I squeezed my eyes shut as more images resurfaced. A giant serpent. A deadly fight. Fangs. Blood. My grandmother's neck, slashed. Drinking something thicker than honey and so saccharine, I had to gag it down. Strange words spoken fervently. A kiss followed by a blinding spark.

Then the nightmares began.

Demons screeching, claws scraping, an unfamiliar woman with midnight eyes and fire in her soul, cursing me. A city of fire and ice. An obsidian throne room. A crown forged of flames and smoke. Enormous gates crafted from bone and leathery wings, bursting open. Betrayal.

I shoved the dream from my mind and focused on my surroundings, then promptly wished I hadn't. I vaguely recalled the sensation of warm, wet-slicked skin against mine. Muscular legs. The feeling of complete safety. I didn't know if that was real or imagined, either.

I closed my eyes again and silently counted until my pulse slowed. It took a second, but I realized my wound was completely healed.

Wrath had worked an enormously powerful spell. I felt recharged,

almost buzzing with excess energy. I'd been an empty vessel before being poured beyond capacity with life. I wanted to jump up and dance, or fight, or make love. Maybe all at once.

To avoid thinking about forbidden kisses while I was naked, I concentrated on the room. I was in a bathing chamber that was ornate yet shabby. The chipped marble tub was beautiful, white with veins of gold. Mosaic tiles covered the walls, depicting winged creatures and fields of flowers.

A slight rustle from the corner to my left caught my attention. Wrath stood with his back to me, as if offering a bit of privacy. Rivulets dripped off the planes of his tanned upper body. His very toned and naked upper body. Goddess above, he needed to put a shirt on. Immediately.

Until he did, I stole a peek at the ink I'd seen in the cave the first night I'd summoned him. Shimmering gold and charcoal tattoos crossed from shoulder to shoulder. They appeared to be lines of Latin, but I was too far away to be sure. I swallowed hard and averted my focus. It looked like he'd gotten out of the tub moments before I'd awakened. Those foggy bits from last night were definitely memories then, not dreams. My face heated. He probably already figured out I was awake and was waiting for me to say something. This was… painfully awkward.

Not wanting to delay the inevitable, I cleared my throat. He rotated until we were face-to-face. Tousled damp hair made him appear almost human, but the energy radiating around him shattered the illusion. It was like soaking in a tub while lightning struck perilously close by. He was alert and looked like he had been for quite some time. It was strange, seeing him outside of the summoning circle. Stranger still that he'd saved me. I wasn't sure what that meant, if anything. I settled against the side of the tub and took a deep breath.

Despite his proclamation about not coming for me, he didn't let me die.

I don't know what powers he'd invoked to bring me back from the edge of death, but he'd given all he had. And I didn't think my protection charm was the only reason he'd helped me. I'd felt something last night, more intimate than if we'd shared a bed. For one strangely long second, I swore we'd been inside each other's minds. What I saw there, deep where he couldn't hide it, wasn't simple hatred he felt toward me. It was much more complex.

Light filtered in from an arched window with no coverings, accentuating the chiseled angles of his face. If I didn't know exactly what he was, I might mistake him for an angel. Which, in a way, I supposed he was. I wondered what he'd done that was evil enough to

be cast out of heaven. I didn't ask. I doubted he'd confess his sins.

His focus roved over my features, his expression unreadable. I fought a chill.

"I had these… dreams," I said slowly. "Or memories. Maybe both. You used powerful magic last night." I watched him carefully. He didn't move or break eye contact. For a horrible second, I wondered if he'd gone catatonic. Then he cocked his head, waiting. "Before I went after the Viperidae, you said there was a great cost for an antidote."

I glanced down at the water. I remembered the way we'd been sitting—his legs and arms and body flush against mine… I'd seen illustrations before. Only a few ancient rituals required bare skin contact—in essence, they were a rebirth of sorts. Like he'd transferred some of his power to me, using water as a conductor between our flesh. None of the rituals were to be taken lightly. I wasn't sure if his magic was the same as a witch's, but figured it was close.

I flicked my attention back to his. "What was your price for saving me?"

The temperature seemed to plummet. He held my gaze as he slowly crossed the room. Unyielding anger shone in those golden eyes. "You should be more concerned with the price you had to pay. I hope it was worth it."

He turned to leave. Before he could, I hopped up from the water and blocked his retreat. "You can't say that and just go. What was the price?"

"Would you really like to have this conversation in the bath?"

"Why not? Suddenly feeling shy?"

He exuded the opposite of shyness. Honestly, with a body like that and all of that power, I wasn't surprised by his confidence. He crossed his arms over his broad chest. Up close, the gold snake tattooed on his arm was breathtaking. "You want to talk, witch. I'll start. You made a choice last night that had catastrophic consequences. If I hadn't been there, you'd be dead."

It was annoyingly true. "Getting my sister's amulet back was worth whatever it cost me. And if I had to do it all over again, I would without hesitation."

"Which proves you're either reckless, or foolish, or both."

"If I'm so foolish and reckless, why save me?" I held up a hand. "Spare me from the protection charm excuse. You and I both know that's not the whole truth." He opened his mouth and I cut him off again. "I don't know the exact spell you used, but I know enough of certain rituals and their requirements that I have a pretty good guess. Tell me why you saved me. Now."

He arched a brow. "Do you have any more demands, your highness? Or may I go?"

“As a matter of fact, I do. Did you use a rebirth spell on me?” He shook his head. “Then why weren’t we wearing clothes?”

A smile slowly tugged at the corners of his mouth. His expression resembled that of an immensely pleased yet smug male. “Because you ripped mine off like a hell beast in heat.” I shot him a dirty look. He blew out a breath that almost sounded like a laugh. Since he couldn’t lie to me, it had to be true enough for him to say it. I rolled my eyes. I’d been clearly out of my mind, and I told him as much. “Also, because the Viperidae inject venom that acts like ice, we needed to reverse the effects quickly. Body heat and hot water were the most efficient and quick ways to prevent hypothermia from killing you.”

It was true. But I also heard him whispering in that strange language. Wrath wasn’t lying, but he was keeping secrets. “You kissed me.”

He abruptly looked away. “Fever dreams have peculiar side effects.”

I grinned. I might not know the full spell, but I knew the chaste kiss was part of whatever magic he’d summoned. He probably neither wanted to, nor had much of a choice in the matter.

But I’m glad he suffered through it, or else I’d be dead.

When I’d found myself inside his head last night, his expression wasn’t one of love, but fear. That, despite his best efforts, I was a splinter slowly burrowing under his immortal skin, and one day I might travel deeply enough to pierce his stone heart. He wouldn’t be wrong.

No matter if he sacrificed some small portion of his power to save me, I’d never forget who he really was. He was a self-centered demon with a mission to protect his own world using any means necessary. He didn’t really care about this realm, or the witches who’d been murdered. His focus was on what it all meant for *him*. The fear I saw in his heart had nothing to do with me, personally, but what emotional entanglements represented in general. Death.

As in death of all he was and chose to be.

Princes of Hell were loyal to none but themselves. Wrath would take an enemy to his bed in an instant if it meant garnering information or power. And I doubted he’d loathe it.

I moved until we were nearly touching. He didn’t back away, but he didn’t reach for me, either. His behavior had nothing to do with goodness, or blossoming friendship, or even lust, and everything to do with gain. I just didn’t yet understand how or why he needed me alive.

But I would do everything I could to find out what his true goals were.

His attention slipped to my mouth. There wasn’t anything kind or

sweet in his gaze. In fact, there was hardly anything soft in it at all. Sometimes when he looked at me, I swore I sensed a beast hiding beneath the mask of skin he wore. It was restless, feral. I had a feeling he kept the monster locked away, but it was never far. I fought a shudder. I didn't ever want to be around when he decided to let his inner animal out of its cage.

A taunting smile curved his lips. "Is this the part where you thank me with a kiss?"

"Hardly. I'm not like you, demon. I don't kiss people I hate. And I never will."

"Never? Are you certain you'd like to make such a declaration?"

I wasn't certain of anything at the moment. I was confused and buzzing with magic that wasn't entirely my own. I'd lived through twenty-four hours from hell—with Nonna's attack, my own brush with death, and being saved by my enemy. His power thrummed through me, filled me. For a second, I wanted him to reach over and drag his hands down my body. Which made no sense.

I couldn't think with him standing so near. I desperately needed a moment to myself. To collect my thoughts and decide how to proceed. And I couldn't accomplish any of those things with the half-naked demon crowding my space. Power surged through my veins.

Before Wrath dazzled me with more charm, I whispered a containment spell that must have been fueled with his demon magic because it did *not* go as planned. One second he was standing there, and the next he was gone. Winked out of existence. It happened so quickly, but I'd managed to catch a glimpse of his face before he'd disappeared. He'd looked so… betrayed.

A mix of emotion haunted me for several minutes. He was my enemy. Even if he'd saved me. That one act of goodness didn't erase that fact. And yet I wasn't sure if I hoped I'd sent him back to the underworld, or if I hoped he was imprisoned in the cave again. It shouldn't matter where he was.

Even if I felt slightly guilty for using his own magic against him, I refused to let it color my judgment. He had his mission and I had mine. That was it. I rummaged around on the floor, but couldn't find my clothes. Damned demon. Of all the ways he could take his vengeance, I didn't predict walking through city streets naked to be one of them.

I glanced up, ready to curse Wrath to Hell again, and noticed a new dress folded in a neat pile in the corner where he'd been standing. I lifted it up, surprised by its beauty. Dark skirts had tastefully placed gold glitter sprinkled across them—not unlike his shimmering *luccicare*. Black sheer sleeves fell gracefully from an off-the-shoulder top. And a gold corset with thorns and wings stitched

across the back finished it off. I forgot my clothing had been torn during the Viperidae attack. Some feeling I'd rather not dwell on took shape as I held the gown. I shoved it away.

The demon prince's magic crackled under my skin, infected my soul. I didn't want to like how alive it made me feel.

I quickly dressed, needing a mundane task to focus on while my feelings darted from one extreme to the next. With Wrath gone, it was only marginally easier to think. Mostly because my thoughts kept returning to him—to the expression on his face. I'd hurt his feelings. And it… bothered me. What a ludicrous turn of events. His family sent invisible ghost demons to attack my grandmother and steal my *cornicello,* and *I* was feeling bad about potentially banishing a demon to Hell. Where he lived and ruled. Probably happily. In the height of demonic luxury. With fire and brimstone and an orchestra of the screaming souls of the damned.

Still, it might have been a rash decision. Unpleasantness aside, Wrath could be useful to my quest for justice. I was almost positive he had ulterior motives for aligning himself with me, but when I really needed him, he'd been there. That act, above everything else, told me enough.

My soul was safe with him.

Which meant we could set our differences aside and work together to solve Vittoria's murder. Neither one of us would love the idea, but at least I could trust that he wouldn't kill me. As of now, the evidence was pointing to a prince of Hell being responsible for the murders, not witch hunters. After what happened with Greed and the attack on Nonna, I needed Wrath on my side.

I blew out a long breath, hoping it was a sound decision.

Goddess curse me, now I had to find out where I'd sent the Prince of Wrath.

I grabbed his shirt, and stole into the city to track down my missing prince of Hell.

TWENTY-TWO

"**If you want** me to speak with you now, ask nicely."

I wouldn't call it relief, but a knot in my chest loosened when I found Wrath stuck in the summoning circle again. He wasn't angry like I'd expected, only a touch bemused. I supposed he didn't expect to be banished right after saving my life. Which was fair. To be honest, I hadn't expected to repay him that way, either. "Are all demons mad, or is it just you?"

He blew out a breath. "You're not the most pleasant viper in the pit, are you? Thanking someone who saved your life by imprisoning them isn't how things are done in my realm. There's no denying you could stand to work on your manners."

All thoughts of striking a tentative alliance left me. A demon lecturing about manners was the most ridiculous thing I'd ever heard. The very *nerve* of him. I fired off a dozen different suggestions—that included farm animals—for what he could do with his remaining time on earth.

"Charming. I wonder where your creativity comes from, perhaps personal experience?" Bickering wasn't getting us anywhere, and I had more important things to do. Apparently, Wrath felt the same way. He narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing me. "What's got your skirts all twisted, witch?"

"Nothing."

"If it's about the spell I used, or the dress…"

"It's not." For some reason, now that I was near him again, I wasn't quite ready to ask for his help solving my sister's murder. I needed some other assurance that this was the best course of action. And there was one thing he might be able to answer that would help me make up my mind. If he didn't laugh himself to death first. I closed my eyes and counted to ten. "An invisible demon attacked my grandmother yesterday. And before that, I think… I think it was stalking me."

I expected him to mock me, or ask if I'd recently indulged in too many spirits. Instead he studied me very carefully. "Did it speak to

you?"

I nodded. "It said, 'he's coming.'"

Wrath paced around the bone circle. "Sounds like an Umbra demon. But for it to be here and speak to you… did it say anything else?"

"I—I don't remember exactly. The first time it said something about memories and hearts being stolen."

"The *first* time?" He swung around to stare at me. Wrath wasn't very good at showing a wide range of emotions, probably because he was an immortal being spawned in Hell and not a human, but was clearly surprised at this news. "Exactly how many times have you encountered it?"

"Maybe three? I thought I was being followed in the monastery… that night… then I found my sister and didn't think about it again." I started walking around the outer edge of the circle. "What's an Umbra demon?"

"Mercenary spies, mostly. They sell their services to any royal House that has use for them. There are a few who are only loyal to Pride. They're mostly incorporeal and are very hard to kill. Magic doesn't always work on them the way you'd imagine it to."

Very hard to kill wasn't *impossible to kill.* A silver lining if ever there was one. "If it's supposed to be spying, why reveal itself?"

"That's the question, isn't it, witch? They typically don't speak at all."

"Do you think Greed hired it?"

"Why would I think that?"

I looked him over for signs of deception. Surely he knew his brother was here. "Because I spoke with him in his gambling den right before my grandmother was attacked. And I may have tricked him into giving me more information than he'd originally agreed to. It's not his sin, but I'm sure his royal pride was injured."

"Funny." Wrath gave me a dry look. "It is nearly impossible to fool a prince of Hell."

"Well, unless he was lying about who he was, tricking him wasn't that hard." I couldn't tell if Wrath believed me, and I didn't care. "You said that some Umbra demons are loyal to Pride… do you think he sent them?"

Given the fact that it stole one of his horns, it seemed likely. But Wrath didn't know that's what I'd been after when I'd invaded the Viperidae nest. I was interested in his response.

"It's possible, but not probable. Not when I'm here. An Umbra demon can't *transvenio* to the underworld. They can only slip between realms if a prince sends them, or if they're summoned. And even then that sort of power can only be used during specific periods."

“How does traveling between realms work?”

“It’s like plucking threads of time, and weaving them in different places.”

Vague. “If someone was trying to summon the devil… would you be able to tell?”

Wrath cut a sharp glance my way. “He can’t be summoned.”

“What if someone had the Horn of Hades? Could Pride be summoned then?”

The demon prince went very still. His surprise only lasted a second before a slow smile spread across his face. “You’ve been busy.”

I had been, and I’d done a decent job so far of tracing my sister’s steps, but now I needed help. Wrath might be my enemy, but he’d saved my life. I hoped it meant I could trust him.

I thought carefully about what I wanted to do next. His responses about the Umbra demon reminded me of my twin and the way she’d take notes in her diary, and it put me at ease. It was like Vittoria was giving her blessing for this most unusual of unions. I reminded myself that Wrath could have easily tried taking my soul or bargaining for my life as I lay dying. And he didn’t do either of those things. Instead, he sacrificed his own power without expecting payment.

“Will you help me figure out if… that happened?”

“If someone summoned Pride?” he asked. I nodded. He looked highly skeptical. “We’d need to know the place where the summoning was attempted. And nothing is guaranteed. Was the Horn of Hades combined, or was just one horn used?”

“Just one.” I inhaled. “And I know where to start. So you’ll help?”

“You need to be more specific when asking to break the containment charm. And don’t forget to use my title. It *is* polite to do so.” I glanced down at his dagger I’d retrieved from home, then flicked my attention back to his. He grinned again; this time it was filled with genuine amusement. “Not my rules.”

“Will you please leave the bone circle and assist me in finding out if someone summoned Pride, Prince Wrath?”

It was the first time I’d ever broken a containment spell, and it was strange. I didn’t have to whisper an incantation, simply requesting him to leave the summoning circle did the trick.

An electric charge in the atmosphere filled the cave, expanding slowly until it pushed the containment circle’s border away. There was a slight crackle and then the outside world returned in full.

Wrath suddenly towered over me. “If you value our new alliance, do not ever use that containment spell on me again, witch. Trust goes both ways. My patience grows weary.”

“Fine. If you want my trust, stop helping Pride find a wife.”

“I can’t.”

“Then don’t be surprised when I defend myself using any means necessary.”

He paced away, running a hand through his hair. I watched impassively as he strode back over to me. Determination flashed in his gold eyes. “Hand me my dagger.” I shot him an incredulous look. “I only need it for a moment. And no, I won’t stab you with it.”

Though he probably wanted to. Badly.

I unstrapped the serpent dagger from the holster at my hip, and handed it over.

Wrath dropped to one knee.

“Emilia Maria di Carlo, you have my word that I will not physically harm a witch, nor force her into a marriage with Pride.” He dragged the blade across his palm, and pressed his bleeding hand against his heart. “On honor of my crown and my blood, I vow that my current mission is to save souls, not take them.”

He stood and handed his dagger back to me, hilt first. Another show of trust. I replaced the blade and looked him over. His wound was already sealed. “Aren’t you going to ask me to accept your blood trade from earlier?”

“I would prefer if you accepted it, but I will not force you to. Are you satisfied by my vow?”

“For the time being.”

“Good enough.”

He brushed past me, stopping near the edge of the cave. Resisting the urge to shove him into the sea below, I silently followed, taking in the silver-backed waves, undulating like a mammoth ebony creature beneath the full moon as he stretched. *Blood and bones*. Of course. A full moon meant more trouble. And my hands were already full of around six foot two of it.

“Here.” I slapped the shirt I’d bought him against his chest. “I don’t care if you hate it, if it smells, or if you’re too princely for peasant clothes, but you will wear this while we’re walking through the city. The last thing we need is to draw any more attention to you.”

Wrath and I settled against the building adjacent to the monastery, watching lights snuff out one by one. Soon the brotherhood would be asleep in their bedchambers. “What possessed you to swear a blood vow to me?”

“I wanted to offer a twig of trust.”

“You mean an olive branch.”

“Same concept, witch.” He tipped his face up at the moon. “Also, I might have wanted more of those… things you brought. If you died

then I'd have to hunt them down. It would have been inconvenient."

"The cannoli?" I asked, feigning incredulity at his attempt at humor. "You saved me in part for some sweetened ricotta?" Thank the goddess he didn't seem to grasp how popular they were, or how widely they could be found in the city. "Do you think the Umbra demon is watching us?"

Tucked snugly between the shadows, it was too dark to see his features clearly, but I pictured his look of resignation anyway. "Are you scared?"

A perfect nonanswer to my question. I knew he was referencing the Umbra demon, but the truth was Wrath scared me, too. Anyone who wasn't a little afraid to enter a chamber with the demon last seen with their murdered loved one would be an idiot.

A couple of streets over, voices rumbled like distant thunder. Laughter followed, bold and boisterous. Palermo was a city that worshipped the night as much as it basked in the glory of the day. Festivals, feasts—there always seemed to be some occasion worth celebrating, especially with food and drink. I hoped to stop the monster bent on destroying that before it struck again.

Several minutes of quiet later, the last golden light inside went dark.

"All right. It's time," Wrath said, straightening. "If you'd prefer to stay here, then stay. I don't coddle."

I ignored him and slipped into the shadows, letting him talk to himself. He seemed to enjoy the sound of his own voice well enough. It felt rude to interrupt.

"I won't comfort. Or tend to your wounds. Emotional or otherwise. I despise—"

When the door across the alley creaked open, his mouth snapped shut. I flashed him a scathing look as I pushed it wider in invitation. He stood there, scowling. I'd wager anything he hadn't heard me move. I wondered how many people ever surprised him. Probably not many, given the way his annoyance seemed to build at the thought of being bested by a witch.

"Are you coming, or not, demon?"

TWENTY-THREE

Thankfully, there were no supernatural whispers waiting for me in the chamber where Vittoria died. No insistent summoning tug, or magical request from the Great Beyond. Only silence and the slight scrape of Wrath's boots as he moved around in the dark. At his quiet but gruff request, I handed him my satchel of supplies, grateful for a few moments to collect myself while he searched inside of it for candles.

According to Wrath, we'd only have a few minutes for him to sense traces of any summoning magic. He warned me there might not be any hints since more than a month had passed. I hadn't been back in this room since I first found my sister's mutilated body. If I had a choice, I'd never set foot in this cursed monastery again. I knew Vittoria wasn't here, but the ghost of that night haunted me all the same. I closed my eyes against the memory of her torn flesh. The utter stillness of death. And the blood.

I rubbed my hands over my arms, though the air was pleasantly warm. It was odd how unexpected life could be. A month ago, I never would've pictured returning with the very creature I'd first found licking my sister's blood, yet here we were. Working together.

Suddenly, I was no longer lost in grief. With everything that had happened, I'd forgotten all about that morbid, blood-licking detail. I spun around, relishing the weight of the demon's dagger as it bounced at my side. "Just to be clear; I permitted you to leave the containment circle tonight for *my* benefit alone. It doesn't mean I like you."

"And here I thought binding me for all eternity meant we were good friends."

"You haven't explained why you were licking my sister's blood."

He finished digging through my bag and struck a match. Light flared up, gilding the edges of his face. Shadows darkened his gaze, but didn't hide the shimmering gold of his irises. His attention slid to the dagger and lingered. He stared at it often enough during our walk here, that I couldn't help but think he was plotting creative ways of getting it back.

I fought a chill as the familiar feeling of danger returned. Sometimes, especially since he agreed to help me, it was easy to forget he was one of the Wicked. “You didn’t ask me to.”

“I most certainly did.”

“What you said was ‘You were standing over her body, *licking her blood from your fingers,* you revolting beast.’” Obviously, it made a lasting impression. He lit the candles and handed me one. I avoided his fingers and he replied in kind. “Don’t touch anything, witch. We don’t want to disturb any lingering scent.”

“Do I even want to know what you mean by ‘lingering scent,’ or is that some Hell creature fact best left to the imagination?”

“Tempting though it may be, it’s best not to imagine me at all.”

I rolled my eyes. If he didn’t want to elaborate, that was perfectly fine. I didn’t give a rat’s tail about his precious demon senses, but I *did* care about Vittoria.

“Fine. Why were you licking her blood?”

He held up his candle and pivoted in place, scanning the chamber. “I was testing it.”

I drew in a deep breath and prayed to the goddess of strength and reasoning to keep me from butchering him right here and now.

“Listen, this little alliance will work much better if you elaborate without constant prompting. Pretend I know nothing about your wicked ways. Testing her blood for *what*?”

“Forgive me, your highness.” A small smile played across his face. “I was testing it for any hints of a demon House she might have aligned herself with.”

“Like the blood trade you offered me?”

He nodded.

“What did you discover when you tested Vittoria’s blood?”

“She hadn’t yet aligned herself with anyone. But that doesn’t mean she hadn’t interacted with a prince of Hell.”

“So even though I summoned you here, no one would know you and I are… working together… without a blood trade, right?”

“Correct.”

Blood and bones. That meant Vittoria could have summoned Greed or even Envy, and, if she hadn’t agreed to a blood trade, there was no way to track that.

“Do you think Greed or Envy would want to stop Pride from marrying?”

He considered that. “Greed enjoys ruling his House, so no. And Envy wouldn’t attempt anything that would bring war to his House. He’s more likely to brood about all the things he doesn’t have and wants, but lacks the ambition to take it.”

Conversation over, Wrath shifted back around with his candle,

and something caught my attention. I bent down, scraping a bit of wax with my nail. The wax was pale rose. I suddenly remembered the candles that had been here that horrible night. I moved my light in a slow arc to see the floor better. Another smaller wax splotch was gray. I rotated, spying the same alternating pink and gray wax impressions.

This was definitely the place where Vittoria had created a summoning circle. “Envy said the others will come looking for me, did he mean your brothers?”

“I imagine so.”

“Could he mean the Umbra demons, too?”

“Perhaps.”

I stared daggers at the demon prince. After he went out of his way to save my life, I wanted to scream over his short responses. I thought again about his inability to directly lie to me and narrowed my eyes. “What did he mean about not knowing the future?”

“I wasn’t there. I’m not sure exactly what he was referencing.” Wrath avoided my gaze. “He could just be using it as a fear tactic to get inside your head.”

“What’s a shadow witch?”

He flicked his attention to me, and gave me a look that said if I didn’t know, he wasn’t going to be the one to tell me. I shot him a glare that promised a long, violent death if he didn’t start talking. He relented. “You’ve got a bit more demon blood in you than other witches.”

“That can’t be true. You’re—” I shut my mouth. He couldn’t lie, but there was no way what he said was true. Our family was goddess blessed, not daughters of darkness. “How would that even be possible?”

He arched a brow. “You do know how children are made, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Good. Saves me from explaining how one of your ancestors had a fine romp with a demon, and produced an heir. Probably not so distantly if Envy could tell by… looking.”

“My grandmother said we were guardians between realms. And that ‘shadow witch’ was the nasty name the Wicked gave us.”

His attention was fully on me now, and I suddenly didn’t want him knowing anything regarding my family’s secret history. I nodded at the candle wax, changing the subject. “I remember thinking the air smelled like thyme. And paraffin. Is that proof she tried summoning Pride?”

“No. Pale rose and gray candles are used by House Greed.” He walked around the chamber. “Thyme and copper are also required when summoning a demon who belongs to that court.”

“Demons can only be summoned using the right color candles?”

“Among other things, yes. Demon courts are broken down into seven royal Houses. Each have their own rituals and requirements. Candle colors, plants, time of day, objects of intent, and metals all vary.”

I pointed to the objects around us. “None of this can be used to summon Pride? Or does having the Horn of Hades negate that part of the summoning spell requirement?”

“Even if your sister had possession of both horns, it still wouldn’t work without the correct candles, metals, and plants.” He held his candle up. “Whatever happened in this chamber that night, I know your sister didn’t summon Pride. And it doesn’t look like she was trying to, either.”

“She told me she was.”

Wrath watched me closely. “It’s impossible to know what her intentions were. She very well might have wanted to summon him, but changed her mind along the way. Or, if she did attempt to summon him, she didn’t do that here.”

I collected my growing frustration. If she didn’t summon Pride, that meant Greed was to blame. He had to be. I thought about the attack on Nonna, and his desire to have the Horn of Hades. It made sense that Greed wouldn’t be content being a prince of Hell when he could become the king of demons. Part of his sin included never being satisfied, always wanting more. Not caring who or what was destroyed in the pursuit of his goals.

Unexpected fury rose in me, and coiled around every inch of the room. It was so powerful, my knees almost buckled from it.

“I vow on my blood that I’ll destroy the demon who did this to Vittoria, and take pleasure in doing it.” Wrath glanced at me sharply and, judging from his flash of surprise, I imagined my gaze went nearly black. My emotions were getting stronger, darker. I blamed proximity to the warrior prince. If Envy inspired feelings of jealousy in me, it made sense that Wrath—intentionally or not—stoked my anger. “You will help me interrogate Greed again. And if I can’t kill him, you will.”

My sister’s amulet glowed an unearthly purple. Wrath’s focus drifted to it, then back to my face. I’d put it on after I’d stolen it from the Viperidae. So far, the gates of Hell hadn’t sprung open, and Wrath hadn’t tried cutting it off my neck.

“Impressive as your rousing speech and temper is, I won’t be bringing war to anyone. And neither will you. At least not without irrefutable proof. The likelihood of it being Greed is very slim.”

“Then how did he get here? Someone summoned him.” I tossed an arm around the chamber. “From the looks of it, he was summoned in

this room."

"Not necessarily. Aside from Pride, princes of Hell can travel here on their own. Plus, there is no trace of Greed's power in this chamber. Unless your sister had a personal object belonging to him, it's far more likely she—or whoever else may have set up this particular circle—summoned one of his subjects. And there are *thousands* of them."

"But there's only *one* demon prince from that House who's currently in Palermo. I don't see thousands of other demons running around here, do you?"

"Are you asking rhetorically or do you expect an answer?"

I opened my mouth and shut it. I had so many more questions about the demon realm, but could almost see Wrath begging me to ask them. I decided today wasn't so lucky for him.

"What kind of object would she need to summon Greed? A dagger, like yours?" I couldn't remember seeing the blade on him when I paid his gambling den a visit. More evidence that he was summoned. "Maybe it's still in our bedroom."

"Afraid not." He shook his head. "It would have been here the night she was murdered. Whoever killed her must have taken it when they left. There's no scent in here that can be traced, though. If it's a demon, I'll have to track it a different way."

"Unless you were right earlier and she didn't actually summon a demon," I mused aloud. "Maybe she stumbled upon someone else trying to summon Greed and they killed her. Or maybe they'd summoned a lesser demon and it attacked."

Because the manner in which her heart had been ripped out… only some terrible creature could have done that. I wouldn't let myself forget that I knew of only one demon who was in this chamber with my murdered twin, mere moments after she'd lost her life.

"It's possible, but I don't believe it was a demon." He stared at the altar where my twin's body had been discarded. "A lesser demon would typically go for the throat, the viscera—it wouldn't target one organ and leave. Especially something large and fierce enough to inflict that sort of damage on a body."

No Pride. No Greed. No clues. This excursion wasn't going as planned.

I thought about the grimoire sheets I'd found. Wrath said certain color candles and objects were required when summoning a particular demon House. Trouble was, neither of the two sheets Vittoria had contained a spell that included pink and gray candles. Anger built inside me again, needing a release. Or a target.

"It's funny." The air was warm, but the blade I pressed into Wrath's back felt like ice in my hands. He stopped breathing. "You can't lie, and I believe that's true enough, but why can't I find

evidence to support your claims of innocence?"

"Are you asking me to comment on your own perceived incompetence?"

"Did you place the candles here as evidence that night to shift blame to Greed? You must have realized my sister had summoning spells for your House, and it would implicate you."

"I was unaware you summoned me using any spell other than your own. I've never had contact with your sister, aside from the night I discovered her body. You do recall that I need to find out who's killing the witches, too, correct? Maybe more than you do."

"Why? Because of the curse?"

"If we're to simplify, yes."

"Tell me everything about it. I want to know who cursed the devil, why, and why it matters to me or this world." He tossed a look over his shoulder that said that line of questioning wouldn't be answered, regardless of the dagger. I considered stabbing him anyway, but it would probably only end with him refusing to answer any other questions. "Have you been pretending my protection charm works?"

"If I was pretending, why wouldn't I have snapped your neck or used my influence by now? It's certainly not because I enjoy your spellbinding company."

"Give me one reason I shouldn't shove this blade through your heart. That *is* how you can die, isn't it? By your own weapon. And only in that one spot."

"Hardly."

"Are you sure?" I angled the tip of the blade against his spine. "I think you're omitting the truth. Know why?"

"Enlighten me."

"I feel your gaze on me when you think I'm not paying attention. You track the dagger every time I move. You need to know where it is. That's why Envy was surprised I had it. You're almost immortal, except for that one little weakness. So, oh, mighty Prince Wrath, if you don't want to die tonight, tell me why Pride really sent you here."

TWENTY-FOUR

Wrath spun around and leaned forward, pressing the tip of his dagger into his chest before I could even blink. A drop of blood slipped down the metal, briefly illuminating it. I stared mutely as the demon's wound healed before my eyes.

He angled his head down. If either of us moved, our lips would touch. I didn't so much as breathe too deeply. "A dagger to the heart hurts, witch, but it'll take much more than that to destroy a prince of Hell. If you still think I'm lying, go ahead and stab me."

A wild part of me wished to test the theory, if only to determine if he was being honest. Another, quieter part still reeling with grief wanted to hand him the blade and see if my protection charm really worked. I decided now wasn't the time for foolish risks and sheathed his weapon.

I stepped away from him, trying not to think of it as retreating. He made no move to stop or pursue me, only watched as I put a few feet of space between us.

"Will you at least tell me about the curse? I think we could—"

Wrath set his candle on the stone altar and was before me a breath later. And he was entirely too close—his back brushed against my chest. I lifted my hands, ready to shove him, when I heard the faint sound of footsteps heading our way.

"Did you tell anyone we were coming here?" Wrath asked. I shook my head, terrified Greed or Envy had tracked us. Wrath's body was coiled, ready to strike. I did my best to calm my breaths.

"Hello?" A familiar, deep voice called out from the corridor.

"Blood and bones." I threw my head back and groaned. "Not now."

Wrath shot me a look over his shoulder. "Someone you know?"

I nodded and the demon relaxed his fighting stance. Light from a lantern preceded our visitor into the room, and I internally cursed the interruption. Wrath stepped aside and appeared downright jovial at my annoyance. I ignored him as Antonio walked in and promptly halted.

“Emilia.” Antonio’s gaze warmed when it landed on me, only to narrow when he saw I wasn’t alone. He glanced between me and my minacious companion, clearly at a loss for words. “I heard voices…” His focus drifted back to Wrath, took in the serpent tattoo that started from the top of the demon’s hand, coiled around his wrist, and disappeared up his sleeve. Then his gaze shifted between the matching ink on both of our forearms. His look was unreadable. Antonio stood straighter. “Is everything all right?”

Wrath inspected Antonio in a way that sent goose bumps skittering over my body.

I quickly put myself between them and offered my old friend a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry if we were too loud. I asked…” I hesitated. I couldn’t very well call him “Wrath.” The demon prince shifted into view. He gave me a slight shake of his head. It was hard to tell if it was a warning to not give his name, or if he was simply getting a better look at my discomfort. “My friend Samael is visiting and we wanted to light a candle for Vittoria.”

Antonio didn’t seem convinced and I couldn’t blame him. I wasn’t a very good actress. I really hoped he didn’t keep asking questions. If I had to guess, lying to a holy man in a place of worship in the presence of a demon who was on a secret mission for the devil was probably bad luck. “Unusual name,” he finally said. “Where did you say he was visiting from?”

“She didn’t. Would you like to fetch us some sacramental wine and delve into my lineage?” Wrath flashed a look that bordered on predatory. “I wouldn’t mind getting to know you better, either. Especially if you’re such a good *friend* of my Emilia’s.”

Wrath said the word “friend” like he thought Antonio was anything but. My mouth hung open for an entirely different reason, though. I couldn’t begin to understand why Wrath had said “my Emilia’s.” Honestly, I wasn’t sure if the demon even remembered my name since he only ever tossed around “witch.”

Antonio seemed just as stunned. “Your—”

“Apologies, Antonio.” I recovered quickly and shot Wrath a warning look as I slipped my arm through the *fratello*’s, swiftly angling him toward the door. I’d wager anything the Prince of Wrath was only trying to make my friend angry so he could siphon those emotions, just like Envy had done to me. “You’ll have to forgive his rudeness; his journey was long and it’s not under the most pleasant circumstances.”

Antonio’s arm had a surprising bit of muscle hidden beneath his robes, but he didn’t try and stop me as I guided him into the corridor.

“Is it all right if we stay for a few more minutes to say our prayers?”

Antonio looked down into my eyes, and his expression softened.

“Of course. I’ll be in the next corridor near the *colatoio* if you need me.”

“Thank you.”

I exhaled as he slowly made his way down the hall toward the preparation room, waiting until his lantern could no longer be seen before I reentered the chamber. Wrath leaned against the altar and stared at me, one brow arched. It was one of the most human expressions I’d ever seen him wear. “Samael, really? *That* was the best name you could come up with?”

“He was a prince of Rome and an angel of death. I’d say that sounds pretty fitting. You’re more than welcome to tell me your real name. Then you won’t have to get your undergarments twisted about ones I make up.”

He strode over to me, stopping at an almost decent space. “Do not *ever* call me that again. I am no angel, witch. Never make that mistake.”

“You don’t say. And here I was under the impression most humans considered Samael the devil.” I brushed past him and went back to the traces of wax left from Vittoria’s summoning circle. “Do you—”

“Have you and that human ever shared a bed?”

I spun around, completely taken off guard by his question. I expected to see a smirk or sneer and wasn’t prepared for the genuine curiosity I found. I wasn’t sure which was more disturbing. “First, that’s none of your business. And second, why would you ask such an asinine thing? In case you didn’t notice, he’s a man of God.”

“He hasn’t always been.”

I clamped my mouth shut. He’d only recently become a member of the brotherhood, and it hadn’t stopped me from pining over him. Truth was, I often dreamed of him trailing kisses down my throat, knotting his fist in my hair, and choosing me instead of his holy brotherhood.

Right before he took that oath, I swore he seemed interested in pursing a romance with me. He’d stop by Sea & Vine, offer to walk me home and linger outside my door. A few times I was convinced he was working up the nerve to steal a kiss. He’d chatter nervously about his favorite books. Vittoria would waggle her brows and slip inside, leaving me alone with him, but he never closed the distance between us.

And none of that mattered now. For multiple reasons.

“Are you able to find anything useful here to help us with Vittoria’s murder?”

“Your pulse is pounding.” Wrath made to reach for the vein in my neck, but stopped shy of making contact with my skin. “Just like your human’s when I claimed you. Odd for such a pious man to get so

jealous."

His attention moved across my face, and he took his time shifting it to my eyes, my lips, tracing each curve and whirl of the tattoo my fluttering sleeves couldn't hide. Wildflowers continued to bloom across each of our arms along with vibrant frangipani blossoms. It must have happened after the spell he'd used to save me. He studied me carefully, as if he was imagining what Antonio saw, and slid his focus down inch by inch until he'd taken in everything from my face to my sandals then dragged it back up just as slowly. I had little doubt that he'd catalogued minute details and stored them away for future analysis. Perhaps he was memorizing my size for a coffin.

I commanded my heart to steady itself. "Is there a point to any of this, or are you simply trying to evoke my wrath again?"

"There's a point to everything, witch. We just have to figure out how it all connects. Don't discount your *friend* simply because he's mortal. Emotions are powerful forces. People kill for much less than greed or jealousy."

I tried to imagine Antonio sneaking around at night, murdering young women. I'd say Wrath was wrong, but I knew enough of man to believe that anyone was capable of anything at any time. While I wasn't convinced Antonio had any *motivation* for killing, I'd keep all options open just in case. For all I knew, he really was running around summoning demons and ripping out hearts between prayer sessions.

"If we can't find proof Vittoria summoned Pride," I said, "what should we do next?"

He stared at me a moment too long before looking away. "I'll send a message to the next potential bride. Hopefully she'll meet us tomorrow and we can be done with this."

The world stopped spinning. I stared at him a beat, processing the fact that another witch had made a bargain, and he'd been aware of it. "You promised to stop helping Pride. And you knew about another witch?" He nodded. "Why is this the first you're telling me?"

"First, I agreed to not harm a witch or force her into a bargain. Second, I was going to share the information after the Viperidae attack, but you banished me to the summoning circle before I got the chance to."

How convenient for him. "Did you return to your realm to get this information?"

"No. Once summoned, I cannot leave this world until you send me back. Or unless my connection is severed with a demon blade."

"What about the transve-whatever?"

"*Transvenio*. My ties to you prevent me from freely traveling between realms. But they also allow me to stay here longer than I normally could. Put simply: our bond anchors me here."

“So how did you get the information about the new bargain?”

“Pride sent a messenger.”

It was too simple for comfort. I didn’t like that the devil could send messages between realms. It made me think of the Umbra demon again, and how it had taken the blade to my grandmother with ease. Maybe the devil was tired of witches wearing his horns.

“If you can only leave this realm when I send you back, how are you planning on delivering her to Hell?”

A spark of admiration lit his gaze. “I’m only speaking with her tomorrow. I said nothing of taking her to Hell.” He gave me a once-over and I wondered if he found me to be a formidable opponent. “I’m going to secure a building tonight. Once I find a location, I’ll send a note telling you where I’ll be. If you don’t hear from me by dusk, meet me back at the cavern.”

TWENTY-FIVE

I pulled the mortar and pestle from the shelf, face strained in concentration as I gathered up the olive oil, garlic, almonds, basil, pecorino, and cherry tomatoes for the pesto alla Trapanese. On days such as this, when the sun was sweltering before noon and even the thinnest dress clung like a second skin, I enjoyed adding fresh mint to the tomato pesto. Unfortunately, we were out of it at the moment.

I set my supplies down and pulled up my wavy hair, allowing a few shorter strands to frame my face. There were no flowers in my locks today—they'd go limp and wither in moments. The back of my neck was already sticky and the day had only just begun. I was seriously reconsidering my choice to wear white as I tied an apron over my sleeveless dress. I would have preferred to keep my magical tattoo hidden, but there was no way I'd survive the heat, even with sheer sleeves. Hopefully, no one in my family would notice the pale ink, especially if I angled my arm away.

I was deep in thoughts of picturing Wrath trying the tomato pesto when my mother joined me in our little kitchen and grabbed sardines from the ice box.

"You didn't come home." My mother wasn't asking, and her tone was almost as sharp as the knife she was using to debone the fish. "Would you care to explain where you were all night?"

I would sooner sell my soul.

I kept my attention on the pesto, crushing the almonds just right. There was no way I was admitting to working with a blood-drinking demon to solve Vittoria's murder. And not only had I temporarily aligned myself with one of the Malvagi, but I had also spoken with two others.

Oh, and, by the way, an invisible mercenary demon was following me around, sputtering cryptic warnings, attacked Nonna, and might assassinate me if ordered to. Then, I'd almost died in a Viperidae attack, and a prince of Hell saved me using ancient, dark magic that required both of us to be naked in a tub. My mother's head would spin. But at least the tattoo wouldn't seem half as bad.

“I was at the monastery.”

“I know.”

I jerked my gaze to hers, startled. “How?”

“Fratello Antonio stopped by this morning, concerned.” She went at the next sardine with gusto. Slipping the knife under the skin, dragging it down the spine. “He said you were with a young man. A friend of our family’s. Said his name was an odd one.”

“I—”

“Save your lies, child.” Mamma’s grip on her knife tightened. “They’re the gateway to Hell.”

I snapped my mouth shut. My mother must know. She must have seen through my ruse, and had somehow pieced together that I’d used the dark arts. And Fratello Antonio Bernardo had confirmed her fears. I swallowed hard, debating how honest I should be with her.

“Well, you see—”

“Tumbling around dark places with handsome young men might distract from the pain for a little while, but it won’t ever take it away. You need to find your own inner strength for that.”

“I—*what*?”

Mamma shook her knife in my direction. “Don’t go pretending you have no idea what I’m saying. You’re lucky your grandmother was sleeping and didn’t overhear him. She has enough to worry about while she’s healing. She doesn’t need to stress over devilish men. Fratello Antonio told me all about that young man. From the sound of it, you’ve bewitched him, too. Antonio said he called you his Emilia. You’re no one’s but your own, girl. Don’t ever forget it.”

Sweet goddess above. This was *so* much worse than Nonna finding out I’d summoned a demon. Heat blossomed across my face and crept down my neck that had nothing to do with the soaring temperatures. My mother thought Wrath and I had been…

I might die of mortification.

Even *picturing* him naked, tugging me to his solid, tattooed body, radiating his infuriating heat as he put his stupid mouth on mine and I gripped him back like he was both my eternal damnation and salvation as we…

I needed to stop that train of thought immediately. I wasn’t as disgusted by the image as I’d thought I’d be.

I knew Wrath’s juvenile taunt would come back to sink its nasty fangs into me one day. I just hadn’t quite pictured it occurring like this.

Mamma set her knife down, her expression softening. She completely misread the reason behind my reddening face. “Love or enjoy whoever’s company you want. But you need to be more careful. If your father had answered the door…” she trailed off, not having to

finish the sentence to drive the point home.

Pummeling the person who was "tumbling" his daughter would be the perfect way to work out some of his own grief. Defending a daughter's honor was an age-old male pastime. Antiquated human behavior aside, I couldn't believe Antonio had come to our home.

My attention sought out the little clock for the thousandth time. The afternoon was dragging by. There were hours left until I had to meet Wrath. To give my hands something to do besides fantasize about wrapping themselves around Antonio's neck, I removed the damp cloth from the mound of dough and began rolling the pasta for the *busiate.*

I couldn't believe I ever wanted to kiss that nosy fool.

"Oh, and Emilia?" I paused my assault of the dough and looked at my mother. "Make extra *busiate.* I promised Antonio you'd bring some over today with your apologies."

I smiled. I'd happily make extra pasta and dump it all over the troublesome *fratello*'s head.

"Buon appetito." I slammed two baskets onto the long wooden table in the dining hall, not bothering to remove the covered trays of food within them. The small gathering of men waiting for their meal went silent. Antonio paused his conversation with another member around his age, concern crinkling his brow.

I gave him a look that I hoped promised a slow, torturous death and it must have worked. He shot to his feet and hastily escorted me into the corridor. I tolerated his hand on my bare arm until we were out of sight, then shrugged him off.

Sleeveless bodice or not, I didn't appreciate the liberty he'd taken with touching my skin.

"Is something wrong, Emilia?"

"I cannot believe you told my mother I was here with someone last night," I hissed. "What I do, and who I spend my time with, doesn't concern you."

Antonio's jaw tightened. "Your sister was murdered here and a month later, I find you in the same chamber with someone I've never seen and whose name you refuse to give. Forgive me if I wanted to check to make sure you were all right."

"If you were that worried, you could have easily waited in the monastery and walked me home. You didn't have to show up at my house before dawn."

He closed his eyes, leaving me to wonder what exactly was going on in his head. He had to know how much trouble he could have

caused. No one was *that* naïve. Finally, when he looked at me again, the fight seemed to leave him.

His voice was quiet when he said, “Another girl was murdered after we spoke last night. And… and I couldn’t stop worrying it was you. After what happened with Vittoria, I had to be sure it wasn’t. I apologize for any trouble—I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. We were too late. Someone must have discovered the identity of the witch Wrath had planned to meet later. But how?

My mind spun. Wrath said he was the only prince who knew about the potential brides, but that didn’t mean other princes didn’t have ways of figuring that out. Spies were utilized in human royal courts—the same likely held true in the demon world. I thought about the invisible Umbra demons who worked for Greed. If he’d sent one after me and it attacked Nonna, it was probable one of them was also passing the names of potential brides along to him.

I still hadn’t quite figured out *why* he wanted the witches dead, though. Maybe it was just to ensure the devil didn’t break the curse and never left Hell.

Antonio reached over and tucked a loose wave behind my ear, his fingers lingering a moment too long. A few weeks ago my heart would have fluttered madly in my chest. Now I couldn’t help but remember how easily one could be torn from a person.

“Do you know who it was?” I asked. Antonio stepped back, looking a bit dazed as he dropped his hand. When he still didn’t answer, I clarified, “The girl from last night?”

He shook his head. “Rumors, but nothing that’s been confirmed. The consensus so far is she had dark hair and eyes like the others. Which isn’t much since nearly everyone on this island fits the description.”

“Where was her body found?”

“That, I don’t know. If anyone from the brotherhood was called there to bless the body, I haven’t heard about it. But I’m sure the market will be abuzz with information tonight. It always is.”

Antonio was right; the vendors knew everything and everyone. Customers from all over the city were in and out of their stalls all day, trading information and gossip while they shopped.

Of course stories were often embellished, but the truth usually remained tucked somewhere inside the exaggerations. Luckily I had another, more reliable source who knew the name of our victim. It was almost dusk, so Wrath should be in the cave by the time I got there. I’d grab the demon, ask him everything he knew about the witch, then go to the market and find out the location of the murder.

Hopefully, Wrath could test the scene like he’d done before, only

this time we'd be successful with finding out which demon prince was responsible.

Then goddess be with him. I had little doubt the demon of war would take almost as much pleasure in destroying the murderer as I would.

TWENTY-SIX

Throngs of people elbowed their way through the busy marketplace, but still managed to give Wrath a wide berth. I wondered if they sensed his otherness and just didn't know what to make of it. There was a quiet assurance about him—a confidence in himself and the space he occupied. Men and women paused in their gossiping, their gazes tracking him as we passed by. Some appreciatively, some with open distrust and scorn. Though that might be because murder was the topic of the evening, and Wrath looked like trouble.

I imagined wandering through the crowded, twisting streets with a leashed panther would give off the same aura of primal danger. If someone was temporarily out of their senses, I admit there *could* be a certain level of excitement, being close to something so lethal.

My senses were *mostly* intact, though. I knew there was no taming the wild beast, only the illusions of domesticity it cast when it felt like toying with its next meal. The fine clothes and impeccable manners were all part of a well-crafted trap to lure prey, likely honed eons before man walked the earth. Wrath was a predator through and through. I had a feeling if I let myself forget that even for a second, he'd happily sink his teeth into my throat and rip it out.

He caught me staring and raised a brow. "Enjoying what you see, witch?"

"Only if I had a death wish."

"Do you?"

"Not even a little one."

His eyes glittered with dark amusement. Of course the topic of death would appeal to him. "Which vendor do you believe knows about the murder location?"

I nodded toward the center of the marketplace where the apparel section began. Booths with fabrics and silks rustled in the slight breeze, beckoning us over.

"Salvatore is one of the best gossips in the city. If anyone has reliable information about Giulia, it's him." I glanced down at Wrath's shirt. "He's also the vendor who sold me that."

“I see. You brought me here to commit murder while we investigate one.”

The good humor promptly left Wrath’s face. I hid my grin as his nostrils flared. For a vengeful prince of Hell, he certainly was touchy about clothing. And I was pretty sure he was only teasing about killing the vendor. I hoped.

In fact, I was surprised he was joking at all. After I left the monastery, I went straight to him and delivered the news. I’d been convinced he’d lay waste to the whole city. Instead, he calmly reported everything he knew about the potential bride. Her name was Giulia Santorini, and he hadn’t been able to get a message to her last night. I’d taken a second to digest this latest revelation.

I thought over everything again now. I knew her family. They sold spices in the Kalsa District, and Vittoria used to volunteer to stop by their shop to pick up orders for Sea & Vine when Uncle Nino or my father couldn’t. Giulia’s grandmother Sofia was the witch whose mind had gotten trapped between realms, shifting between realities so swiftly she no longer knew what was real and what was a vision.

As far as I knew, after what happened to Sofia, the Santorinis never dabbled in the dark arts again. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Giulia decided to invoke the dark arts like her grandma. And maybe she was the one who’d given my sister those mysterious grimoire pages.

That thought stopped me cold.

If Giulia had somehow given my sister a spell to summon a demon, it made sense that she’d taken it from her grandmother’s grimoire since Sofia was known to use the dark arts. Maybe the grimoire was the missing link… I thought again about the first book of spells. About the magic binding my sister’s diary. Was *that* the connection between the murders? Maybe not the dark arts, but the source material?

“What’s wrong?” Wrath asked, breaking into my thoughts. “You look strange.”

“Are you *sure* you didn’t tell Giulia to meet you last night?” I asked. Wrath shot me a look that silently communicated he might strangle me if we went over this again. To be fair, I might have already asked him half a dozen times on our walk into the city. And half a dozen more once we were here. “Maybe you’re double-crossing Pride and killed her.”

He let out a long sigh. “I assure you that is still not the case. I have no reason to kill anyone. As I said before, my message never made it to her.”

I knew he wasn’t double-crossing anyone, but liked hearing him get flustered. “Do you think one of your brothers killed her?”

"No."

"And we're back to one-word answers."

"Careful, witch, or I might think you're interested in having a civil conversation." The barest hint of a smile ghosted across his lips as I rolled my eyes. "Simple answers don't require padding."

"Why don't you think one of your brothers did it?"

"What reason would they have?"

"Let me count the ways, oh, wicked one." I ticked off motivations on my fingers. "Greed might be interested in taking the throne. Maybe Envy is jealous and wants more power. If Pride doesn't marry, then he remains cursed and can't leave Hell. Which is a pretty decent motivation if one of your brothers wants to rule this realm. Shall I go on?"

Wrath glared at me, but didn't respond. Apparently he didn't like my accusations, but couldn't find a way to discredit them as foolish theories. We turned the corner, stepped around a pile of precariously towering wooden crates, and narrowly avoided getting speared by a swordfish head. Wrath took in all the sights and colors silently. I wondered if he had anything like it where he was from, but didn't ask.

A sea of people standing in line for gelato parted for us as we crossed the road and entered the clothing section. Salvatore was in the middle of arguing with someone over another threadbare tunic when Wrath stopped at his table, emanating that quiet menace he was so good at. Conversations ceased. The other patron took one look at the expression on the demon's face and bolted into the crowd, the clothing in question discarded and forgotten.

"You and I have business, vendor."

"I don't believe we…" Sal's attention shifted to the shirt Wrath wore, then shot to me. I gave him a little finger wave. I'd tried warning him about the condition and cost. Now he could deal with an angry demon. I felt the not-so-subtle rattling of Wrath's namesake emotion as it slithered toward Sal and wound around him.

The vendor's hand trembled as he pushed it through his dark hair. "Signore, h-how nice. The shirt is—"

"Being exchanged for that one."

Wrath jerked his chin toward the row of clothing hanging behind the stall; the most expensive pieces judging from the drape of them. Sal opened his mouth, took in the set of Wrath's shoulders, then closed it and plastered on a big false smile. Smart man.

"A bargain indeed!" Sal cringed as he removed the black shirt from a hanger and handed it over. Well, he tried to hand it over. He clutched it before Wrath finally snatched it away. "This is a fine, fine garment, signore. It's a perfect match for your trousers. May you wear it well."

I rolled my eyes skyward. Sal cracked under pressure from the demon faster than an egg hitting the ground. Next time I wanted a good deal, I'd have to try scowling and summoning some quiet menace, too.

Wrath was out of the tawny monstrosity a breath later and tossed the offending garment back at the vendor. If the demon prince hadn't already caused a disturbance before, his bare, sculpted chest certainly did now. He slipped the new shirt on, seemingly unaware of the effect he had on the people nearest us. Muscles, supple and sinuous, moved with practiced ease. His serpent tattoo also caused quite a stir. Someone nearby commented on how large it was, how lifelike. Another person whispered about its possible meaning.

A line of people that had been meandering through the clothing stalls halted to watch.

I begged the goddess of serenity to send me some in buckets, then turned to Salvatore to get what we actually came here for. "Do you have any information about Giulia?"

"I sure do. Reliable sources, too. I heard from Bibby down at the docks, who spoke to Angelo who makes ricotta near the palace, that her heart was ripped clean from her chest." Despite the graphic nature of his gossip, Sal looked immensely pleased with himself. "Her nonna was the one who went a bit…"

He lifted his pointer finger to his temple and made circles, an offensive gesture indicating madness. I went to admonish him when a member of the brotherhood walked by the stall and touched his forehead, heart, and each shoulder in the sign of the cross.

"Anyway… whatever got her was vicious. Angelo said blood sprayed all over the building. Looked like animals ripped her apart. He had a devil of a time cleaning it up. Chunks of…"

"I'm sorry, but where was her body found?" I asked, cutting him off mid-description. I had my own nightmares about how that looked firsthand, and didn't need any more details. "You mentioned someone who works near the palace?"

"That's right. Angelo with the ricotta said it was near his stall out front. Prime location." Sal jerked his chin to the right. "The police are still there, so you won't miss the crowd. If you hurry, you might still see the body."

It was impossible to get within sight of the murder scene. Sal's information was indeed reliable. And it looked like he'd told a few hundred of his closest confidants the same thing he'd shared with us. Wrath was about to barrel his way through, but I reached out to stop

him.

"How close do you need to be to…" I glanced around. There were too many humans around for me to start talking about demons. "To do your special investigation?"

Wrath was well versed in the art of deception. He didn't miss a beat. "I'd like to get a better visual, but I can tell from here that none of my brothers have recently been in the area."

I scrunched my nose. His heightened sense of smell was unsettling. I rolled up onto my toes, trying to see over the heads of everyone. Wrath startled me by briefly placing a hand on my back so I wouldn't wobble. I couldn't see the body, thank the goddess, but I saw a priest tossing holy water around and assumed he was doing some sacramental blessing for her soul. It would be a long while before the crowd dispersed, so there was no point in waiting here until then. We might as well return tomorrow night when all was quiet.

"Follow me," I said, turning toward an alley. Wrath didn't protest and kept close as we maneuvered out of the thickest part of the crowd. A little food stand that had already closed up for the night caught my attention. There was a painting on its side—a pawprint clutching a stalk of wheat, and something about it made me think of Greed. I waited until we were far enough away to speak openly. "You're sure you didn't find any traces of Greed?"

"Unless he's come up with a way to mask his magic, no. He wasn't here. Why are you so convinced he's to blame? What evidence do you have?"

"I'm not convinced of anything. I'm just trying to tug on threads that seem likely." I bumped into a few people still on their way to the murder scene, muttered apologies, and turned down another street. "As for evidence? Based on my conversation with him, his desire to possess the Horn of Hades, and the attack on my grandmother immediately following my meeting with him, Greed makes the most sense right now."

I felt Wrath's attention on me as we moved into a narrower street, a constant prickle of energy between my shoulder blades, but he didn't ask how my grandmother was or offer apologies.

And to be perfectly honest, he was the last creature in the world I wanted comfort from.

I stopped at the turnoff to my neighborhood. "Who is the next witch on your list?"

"I don't know yet."

"That needs to be our next priority," I said, glancing past him. The street was quiet in this quarter. "Once you find out who she is, we'll have to hide her somewhere safe."

Wrath pressed his lips together, but finally nodded in agreement.

“I’ll send word to my realm tonight. I should have an answer by morning.”

It wasn’t cold, but I rubbed my hands over my arms anyway. My dress was creamy white and sleeveless. Perfect for warm summer nights, but terrible for fighting chills brought on by fear. Wrath tracked the movement, his attention focused on my forearm. Wildflowers twisted and tangled all the way up to my elbow now. I didn’t have to see his arm to know his tattoo was the same. I looked down my street, relieved to see a few children out playing. I didn’t want to be scared of Greed or Envy lurking in the shadows, but I was.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll see you tomorrow then. Where should we meet?”

“Don’t worry.” Wrath flashed a wolfish grin. “I’ll find you.”

“You know that’s deeply unsettling, right?”

“Iucundissima somnia.” Sweetest dreams. And then he was gone.

TWENTY-SEVEN

"**I was thinking** of making cassata for tomorrow's dessert."

Mamma turned to me, her expression worn, but hopeful. Somehow I managed to hide the swift emotional punch from registering on my face. The sponge cake with sweet ricotta layers was a favorite of both mine and Vittoria's. We used to request it each year for our birthday and Mamma never disappointed us. She'd roll out a thin layer of marzipan, covering the whole cake in the sweet paste before decorating it with brightly colored candied fruit. I loved how that slightly chewier upper layer contrasted against the soft deliciousness of the wet cake hidden inside.

I wasn't sure I could ever eat it again without feeling crushed by a wave of sadness, but refused to dampen my mother's spirits. When I smiled, it was genuine.

"That sounds delicious."

My mother shuffled over to the dry goods cabinet, seemingly exhausted again from her brief spurt of conversation, and pulled out a bowl, filling it with sugar and all the supplies she needed for the cake. Today was a bad day for her. I watched her, then went back to removing the *sarde a beccafico* from the oven. I inhaled the fragrant scent of stuffed sardines.

Nonna's recipe called for golden raisins, pine nuts, and breadcrumbs in the stuffing, then she'd drizzle melted sage butter and thyme over it before finishing it off with large bay leaves to separate the fish while it baked. The result was a symphony of flavors that melted in your mouth and stuck to your ribs.

I'd no sooner set the fish on a platter when my father stepped into the kitchen, waving around a folded note. He expertly swiped a piece of stuffing that had fallen out, and I shook my head, but smiled all the same. My father was always *very* helpful in the kitchen, sampling each new recipe for quality purposes. Or so he kept claiming.

"Salvatore dropped this off for you, Emilia," he said around a mouthful of food. "Said your friend asked him to deliver it right away."

Mamma wore a rosary like other humans, and I imagined she'd be kissing it later, uttering novenas if she ever found out who my "friend" really was. I hastily snatched the note before she could. "*Grazie,* Papà."

My father pulled a stool over and started loading a plate, drawing my mother's attention. I used the distraction to hurry into the corridor and read the short message.

Piazza Zisa and Via degli Emiri. Eight in the evening.

I didn't recognize the careful, neat penmanship but it dripped regal arrogance and made my stomach twist. The address he'd given was Castello della Zisa. La Zisa was a sprawling Moorish palace that mostly sat in ruin now. The king who'd had it built was called Il Malo —"the bad one"—so it was more than fitting the demon prince had taken up temporary residence there.

I refolded the note, shoved it down my bodice, then made my way back into the kitchen. I'd have just enough time to finish dinner service and hurry over to the palace before dark.

I crept into the abandoned castle from the rear garden, and roamed around several desolate yet ornate rooms before finally circling around to the main entrance and finding another note tacked to the front door—the last place I'd expect a secret meeting location to be posted. I stared out across the lawn at the reflecting pool, and shook my head.

Subtlety was an art form lost on the demon, apparently. Though I supposed when he was the biggest, baddest predator around, he had little to fear.

Roof

I inwardly sighed. This palace had been built in such a way that cool air filtered through it like an ice box, but of course a creature from Hell would be happiest in the scorching heat. I was dripping with sweat, and spitting mad by the time my foot hit the last stair.

I marched across the roof, determined to flay the demon alive, and halted.

Wrath lay stretched out on his back, hands laced behind his head, soaking in the last rays of the sun as it hovered above the horizon in the distance. Light gilded his profile and he turned his face toward it, smiling at the warmth. He hadn't noticed me yet, and part of me was relieved.

His expression was serene, a look I hadn't seen from him. Though his body was relaxed, an undercurrent of alertness remained that made me believe he could spring up and attack in less than a breath. He was like a serpent, laying in a patch of sun.

Lethal, beautiful. Wholly untouchable.

I wanted to kick him for being so dangerously breathtaking. His head snapped in my direction, his gaze capturing mine. For a minute, I forgot how to breathe.

He slowly took me in. "Did something happen on the way here?"

"No."

"Then why do you look confused?"

"I thought you couldn't bear daylight."

"Why is that?"

I rolled my eyes. As if he didn't know. "Because the Malvagi turn to ash in the sun. That's why we always meet at dusk."

He looked at me oddly. "What else, exactly, have you heard of the Wicked?"

I lifted a shoulder. Everyone knew the legends. Since they concerned him, I doubted he was that clueless. "You're bloodthirsty demons. You've got red flecks in your eyes, your skin is like ice, you're beautiful, and your kisses are addictive enough to make someone sell their soul for another."

A bemused smile touched his lips. "It's nice to know you find me so attractive, but I'm not one of *those* demons. My eyes aren't red. And if you'd like to find out if my skin is warmer than ice, that can easily be arranged."

To further his point, he undid a few buttons on his shirt, exposing a patch of bronzed skin. A light sheen of sweat glistened, as if beckoning. My face heated, having nothing to do with the sun. "I work in a kitchen and can break down a chicken carcass in under three minutes, I imagine doing the same to you wouldn't be that different."

"I assure you, there's no truth to these stories." His eyes sparked with mischief. "Though I can't promise my kisses wouldn't be sinfully good."

"I thought we were supposed to meet later tonight. Did something happen to change that?"

Wrath stared at me a moment longer and for some reason, I held my breath. He looked like he wanted to say something else, but an

inner battle was being waged. Finally, he laid back down, face tipped up at the sun, and closed his eyes. I exhaled.

"No. Nothing of note."

"Do you know who the next witch is?"

"Not yet."

I stood there, waiting for him to elaborate. When he didn't bother, I walked over and glared at him until he looked up grudgingly, shielding his face with a strong hand. "If you don't have information on the next witch, why did you ask me to come here?"

"I…" He squinted at me. "I've secured the building with my magic so, unless you invite something in, it'll be safe from humans, my brothers, and most supernatural creatures. I wasn't sure what you'd had planned for the evening, and thought you might like to see where we'd be staying. I'll be out for a little while, so please look around, make yourself comfortable, and grab your things."

I stared at him, ignoring the whole "moving in together" scenario. "Where are you going?"

"To meet one of Pride's messengers."

"Is he the one who gave you Giulia's name?"

Wrath nodded. "My associate has been watching him since late last night, and witnessed him passing information this morning to someone wearing a hood. I believe whoever he spoke to is our murderer."

"Why didn't your associate follow the hooded figure?"

"He tried. When he closed in, the person crossed into a crowd and disappeared."

I blew out a breath. Of course. "What's the plan?"

"I'm supposed to meet Pride's messenger to retrieve the next name soon. Instead, I'll interrogate him, and will hopefully discover the identity of the robed figure that way."

"Or I could just use a truth spell."

"Too dangerous. Plus, you'll be grabbing your things. I won't be gone for long."

"I see." Something in my tone made him sit up again, a wary expression on his face. So, he could be a smart demon. "You know I won't stay when there's a chance we can find out who killed my sister," I said. "Either take me with you, or I'll follow you."

He studied me for a long minute then sighed. "*I* will not be pleasant. I can have the meeting, and tell you about it. I promise to not hunt down the murderer without you."

"Wait… are you suggesting you've *been* pleasant?" I snorted. "I pity your enemies."

His grin was anything but friendly when he said, "That might be the wisest observation you've made yet, witch."

A clock in the city square chimed the hour. He stood, then ran his golden gaze over my clothes, appraising. “We leave in forty minutes. Try to wear something less… pedestrian. Better yet, I’ll have something more appropriate sent to your home.”

I glanced at my dress, frowning. It was a modest cotton gown I’d dyed a deep lavender last summer. It didn’t have a corset, which I was very pleased with, but it still had a pretty shape. I liked how it was fitted through the bust and waist and then dreamily flowed down to my ankles. It was hardly *pedestrian,* and yet… “What if I don’t want to wear your fancy clothing again?”

He didn’t bother responding.

I looked up, ready to snap about his rudeness, but he was gone. I cursed him the entire way home, wondering why I’d gotten stuck with such a clothes-obsessed snob of a demon.

Perhaps Nonna was right about the cost of *le arti oscure;* being subjected to Wrath certainly felt like a punishment for using the dark arts.

I was so annoyed, it took far too long for me to focus on the most important detail of all that he’d let slip—Wrath knew where I lived.

TWENTY-EIGHT

I looked down at my new, finely made dress and frowned at the dark layers. “Why do villains always wear black?”

“Better to hide the blood with, witch.”

I eyed the demon standing in the alley next to me, thinking his response explained a lot about his personal style. Then I wondered how much blood he planned to spill tonight if he’d dressed us both like living, breathing shadows.

I was *almost* disturbed the thought didn’t terrify me more.

“Who are we meeting? Human? Demon? Werewolf?”

“Werewolves are like puppies. It’s hellhounds you need to watch out for.” Wrath chuckled at my look of horror. “We’re meeting a mortal who sold his soul. Speaking of, I need my House dagger back before he arrives.”

I gave him a flat stare. Arming a demon didn’t seem very beneficial to me. Then again, he needed me to be his precious anchor. He’d mentioned it before, but had shared a few more details on the walk here. I handed the blade over.

“Say I were to die… how long would it take for your powers to start diminishing?”

“Depends on how much magic I expend. If I don’t use much, I could retain them for a small amount of time.”

A small amount of time for an immortal was probably a decade for me. “Can someone else act as an anchor?”

He blew out a breath. “Technically, yes. Any human or denizen of this world can strike a bargain, and agree to anchor a demon. It is rare and not worth the time it would take to find someone, and agree to terms both parties accepted.”

Several moments of silence passed. I tapped my fingers against cool stone. We were hiding in a little alcove off the cathedral square, and it felt like we’d been waiting years for the mysterious messenger to show up. Five minutes in, I quickly discovered standing still wasn’t something I enjoyed very much. When I wasn’t moving, all I could do was think about my sister.

“Why do demons steal souls? Do you need them for something specific?”

I felt the weight of Wrath’s attention as it settled on me. I shifted to see him, surprised to note the level of incredulity he wasn’t bothering to hide. *Right.* Like he’d have a nice long chat about soul collecting with the enemy. I lifted my hands in placation, and looked away. Inexplicably, I turned back to him a breath later.

“Why do you think hearts are being taken?”

“Are you asking so many questions in hopes of frightening off the messenger before I can scare information from him?”

“I want to know what you think.”

There was such a long pause, I didn’t think he’d answer. “We don’t have enough information to speculate. And it’s unwise to make assumptions without fact.”

“Do you believe anything would want to…”

“Eat them? Yes. Plenty of creatures find freshly beating hearts to be the most supreme delicacies, witch. Then there’s the ritualistic significance. Sacrifice. Sport. Summoning. And plain old depravity. That level of sadism isn’t limited to one species, so we’re back where we started.”

I felt sick. “A simple yes would have sufficed,” I said quietly.

“What you want is for me to say something comforting.” His voice was like steel when he faced me. “Lying and saying your sister felt no pain serves no purpose to *you.* I imagine, no matter the reason, whoever or whatever took her heart, did so while she was very much alive and very conscious. I promise you, there is *no* strategic value in getting lost in emotional entanglements. Hone your anger and sorrow into weapons of use, or go back home and cry until the monsters come for you. Because come for you they will.”

“I’m not afraid of monsters.”

“You may think so now, but my brothers delight in bending creatures like you to their will. They’ll feed you their emotions and siphon yours until you don’t know where you end and they begin. There are many forms of Hell. Pray to your goddesses you never have to experience them firsthand. You need to be sharp and focused, or you’ll end up just as dead as the others.”

Tears pricked my eyes. Not from sadness, but pent-up rage. “I am focused, you steaming sack of horse manure. All I dream about is avenging my sister. Don’t you *dare* accuse me of being too emotional. I will destroy *anything* that gets in the way of achieving my ends. Even you. And I’m not scared, or else I never would’ve summoned you to begin with!”

“You should be terrified.” His gaze practically pinned me in place. “Vengeance is a potent emotion. It makes you easy prey to both

humans and demons alike. *Never* let someone know what your true motivations are. If they know what you want more than anything, they'll craft all sorts of sweet lies and half-truths to manipulate you. They'll know *exactly* how far they can push, what to offer, and what you would never refuse, giving them the upper hand. Your first goal should be to remain alive. Figure out everything else as you go."

"You know my true goals."

"Yes. I do. And it was an extremely foolish mistake on your part to tell me. Make no bones about it. All it takes is a bit of prodding, a tiny push to annoy you and you immediately fall into the trap of lashing out in fury. And in that burning rage you told me *everything* I need to know about what you want." He shook his head. "What will you promise me, Emilia, in exchange for your deepest desire? What *wouldn't* you do to achieve justice for the sister you love? Now I know there's no price too high to demand. I can ask anything, and you'd give it."

We were standing very close now, each of us breathing very hard. I hated that he was right. He didn't even manipulate my emotions like Envy had; he didn't have to. He'd simply goaded me into telling him my deepest desires out of anger. And he only had to push a little bit to get me to snap. Furious with myself for being outmaneuvered by a demon, I did the best thing I knew how—I lied like the devil.

I stuck my finger in Wrath's chest and poked him hard. "If you think that's everything that motivates me, you're sadly mistaken, demon. And why do you care anyway?"

He slowly wrapped his fingers around mine, halting my assault on him. He didn't let go and I wondered if he realized I'd stopped poking him the second his blazing skin touched mine. Now he was just holding my hand against his chest, his heart hammering beneath my touch.

And I was allowing it.

I regained my senses and stepped away.

"That's the fourth time you've lied to me, witch."

It *really* stoked his anger, too. I smiled demurely. "Maybe you should tell me more about the curse. I'd like to know more about that part."

"Fine. You want to know the bloody details? The curse—"

"Signore, is… should I return in a little while?" A man somewhere between thirty and forty stood a few feet away, wringing a letter in his hands. "Your brother said—"

From one breath to the next Wrath had the messenger up against the wall, his forearm pressed hard against the man's windpipe. Blood dripped from the messenger's nose onto his tunic and the demon closed his eyes as if in utter rapture.

“Hello, Francesco. Pardon my rudeness, but I hear you’ve been selling my secrets. If we were in the Walled City, you’d already be dead. Consider this a favor.”

I stood there, frozen. Half in shock, half in horror. Wrath had exploded in violence faster than it took me to suck in a startled breath.

“Did I ever tell you the scent of blood drives me into a near frenzy, witch? Your kind believes we crave the taste of it, but princes of Hell don’t usually drink blood. It’s power we’re intoxicated by. The more I allow someone to bleed, the more power I hold over their life.”

I blinked. I could barely form a coherent thought. I forgot, through our bantering, who Wrath really was. I imagined I was seeing only a small fraction of what he could do.

He leaned harder into the human whose face was now a deep purple. If Wrath pushed any harder, the man was going to die. I made to step forward, then stopped.

“I crave power more than money, or blood, or lust. And there’s no greater power than choice. I’d lie for it. Steal, cheat, maim, and murder. If I could, I’d sell my soul again for it, witch.”

“Sell your…” I shook my head. Demons were soulless creatures.

Wrath opened his eyes and turned to me, his irises glowed bright gold in the dark. There wasn’t anything human in them, and I realized he’d been keeping this part of himself under lock and key. Some claimed the Wicked were angels before they committed unforgivable sins, and were cast out of heaven. Now I understood how those stories started—Wrath’s gaze blazed with heavenly fire. He was wrathful justice: pure, swift, and completely unforgiving.

Ignoring my growing fear, I turned over his admission, and understood what he was really saying; he was offering me a choice. I had the power to walk away from what he was about to do. Or I could choose to stay and take part in it.

I thought of my sister’s ravaged body, and the other witches who’d died just as brutally because this man shared information about the messages he carried. Wrath said he was going to scare the messenger to find out who he’d been selling secrets to. His sudden burst of violence shouldn’t have surprised me. I nodded, almost imperceptibly, but the demon understood.

Wrath faced the messenger again. “Who paid you to open my letter, Francesco?”

The man’s attention shot to me, searching for assistance. Wrath looked me over slowly again, waiting. Francesco made his choice. Now it was time to make mine.

“The prince asked you a simple question, Francesco. I’ll repeat it once for your benefit and then I’ll let him ask *his* way. And I’m sure

you already know that won't be pleasant." I injected a ruthless charm into my tone like Wrath's, and the man flinched. "Who paid you to open his letter?"

Wrath kept staring at me. And even though his expression hadn't shifted in the slightest, I swore I almost sensed… approval. My stomach tightened and I fought the urge to be sick. If I'd done the right thing, I didn't think I'd feel so ill.

Francesco gurgled and scratched at the arm still pressed against his windpipe, his nails snagging on the demon's cuff. I hoped Wrath wouldn't strangle him to death before we got our answers.

The demon prince must have suddenly eased up on the pressure because Francesco gulped air like a fish yanked from the water. "Would you feel more comfortable talking with my blade at your throat?"

Francesco's golden skin blanched, but I noticed his hands fisting at his sides. Wrath was using his powers, and the messenger was getting mad. His chest rapidly rose and fell. "Do what you want, but I won't tell you a thing, demon pig."

"Really?" Wrath smiled, a flash of teeth that seemed to put Francesco on the verge of pissing himself despite his newfound rage. "Let's test that out, mortal. Who do you work for?"

"God." The man spit in the demon's face, and the glob slowly dripped to the ground. Wrath's blade was under the man's chin in an instant, the tip pressed hard enough for blood to slide along the metal. It looked like it took all of his willpower to not shove the dagger through the human and into the stone he leaned against, severing his spinal cord. Shadows seemed to pulse from Wrath. For a second, I wasn't sure if the demon of war would end him right there.

"Apologies, Francesco. But my patience is growing thin. Your actions sent four women to their deaths. Do not think I will not send you to yours just as brutally."

"Go ahead and kill me. I won't tell you anything." Francesco's head cracked against the wall when Wrath slammed him back. Blood dribbled from the human's mouth as he laughed, delighting in the violence. He smiled, teeth stained red with blood. "I hope you all rot in Hell."

I felt Wrath's rage turn from a simmer into a full boil. Soon, whether he meant to or not, he'd kill Francesco. And we'd lose our biggest chance at discovering who murdered my twin. I heard both Nonna's and Wrath's warnings singing through my head, but it didn't matter.

We were out of options and the anger raging around us was growing intense enough to burn. Wrath was about to snap. I pulled his emotions to me, using them as fuel for my truth spell as I clutched my

sister's amulet.

"Did you open the letter?" I asked, my voice laced with magical command. Wrath's attention snapped to me and if I didn't know any better, I'd think fear entered his features.

Francesco nodded before answering. "Y-yes."

"Did anyone pay you to do it?"

"Yes."

"Who paid you, Francesco? Greed?"

"No."

"Tell me who paid you then."

"I do not know his name."

"Is he human?"

He lifted a shoulder. "He wore a hood. I didn't see his face."

"Did you tell him where Giulia would be the night she was murdered?"

He swallowed hard. "Yes."

"Did you meet with him today?"

"Yes."

My anger flared up. "What information did you give him?"

"A-a-another address. And a time to meet. I didn't have a name this time, I swear!"

"What time and address did you give him, Francesco?"

"Th-th-th-the Piazza Vigliena. M-m-midnight."

I looked at Wrath for further instruction, but he shook his head. The truth spell was nearly up. Blood spilled from the human's nose, and his eyes had turned glassy. If I pushed any more, he'd die. I glanced down, noticing my whole body trembled. Wrath stepped close to him.

"If you ever share my secrets again, I'll cut out your tongue. Then I'll carve out your heart. Have I made myself clear?" He gave Wrath the barest hint of a nod, careful to not slice his own throat. Sweat dampened his hairline. He really didn't look well. "Next time you're tasked with carrying a message for me, don't let curiosity or greed get the better of you. Those conditions often prove deadly."

I couldn't help but notice the trickle of urine streaming down the man's leg as the demon let his weapon drop. He stared from Wrath to me, a deep crease forming in his brow. He blinked slowly as if awakening from a dream. Or a nightmare.

"Who… who are you? Why am I here? P-please… don't hurt me. If you're looking for money, I don't have any." He turned out his pockets. There was nothing but lint. "See?"

My nausea from earlier was back and almost had me doubling over. I'd invaded his mind, and must have destroyed his recent memories. Dark magic demanded a price. And it didn't always come

in the form someone expected. Guilt swirled through me. Just because I had power, didn't mean I should abuse it. "You're—"

Wrath flashed me a warning look. "You're Francesco Parelli Senior, and you're on your way home. You had too much to drink. You better hurry before Angelica gets mad again. Do you remember the way?"

Francesco swiped at a tear and shook his head. He seemed so fragile now, so lost. And *I'd* done that to him. Not some demon, or horrible creature from Hell. Me. I'd broken the most important rule of this world. I'd taken his free will, and I'd bent it to mine.

Wrath turned Francesco toward the cathedral, handed him a coin purse, and whispered in his ear.

I stared at the demon's back, heart racing. Wrath could've easily left the man alone in his new hell, but didn't. Just like he could have easily demanded I trade my soul in exchange for justice for my twin. He knew what I wanted and what I'd be willing to give up for it, and had asked for nothing. I didn't think there was mercy in Hell. But maybe I was wrong.

Wrath gritted his teeth. "What?"

"You could have killed him."

"Don't. I beat him and you stole his freedom of choice. His memories will eventually return, but that piece of your soul will not. I would have gotten our information without magic. There's an old saying about fools rushing in where angels fear to tread. From now on, I suggest you heed the warning. Come on." He walked deeper into the shadows. "We need to get to Quattro Canti."

If he didn't want to discuss the forbidden magic I used to get our information, that was fine with me. I already felt like my skin was crawling with grave worms. "Why?"

"The real messenger is waiting for us there."

TWENTY-NINE

Before we waltzed into the middle of the baroque square, Wrath situated us in another crammed alley. He claimed it was to get a better idea of the layout, and any traps other demons—like Greed or Envy—might have set. He politely asked me to wait while he strode over to a young man with a scar carving a path through his right cheek. Since he asked nicely, I decided to agree… temporarily. Letting him go ahead afforded me an opportunity to observe him, and the new messenger, on my own.

The human was intriguing. His stunning combination of dark features and upswept eyes hinted at North African and Asian ancestry. He hadn't noticed me peering from the shadows nearby, but I saw him clearly enough.

He leaned against a building, digging imaginary dirt from shorn nails with a deadly looking blade. He projected a sense of boredom, but his gaze tracked the movements of everything around him with a predator's focus. Even the demon prince.

Wrath marched over without hesitation, and I was unfortunately a *little* too far away to make out their conversation. Judging from the amount of eye-rolling the human was doing, I imagined Wrath was lecturing about something. I quietly drifted closer.

"… suspects the truth, Anir. I'm sure the others will in time, too."

"Too late for regrets now," the human, Anir, said. His voice was familiar, I just couldn't place it. "With everything going on… it might be a good thing. I mean, you chose to do the ritual. Right? Is it really *that* bad?"

"She's a demon-blooded damned *witch*. What do you think?"

Were they talking about *me*? I curled my hands into fists, my nails creating little crescent moons in my palms. *He* was a high-handed, arrogant, no-good demon from Hell. But I wasn't harping on his less-than-appealing qualities, was I? No. *I* was mature enough to set them aside to work together to stop a murderer from slaughtering any more witches.

"Sounds like a lovely girl. Will you be properly introducing us?

You've only got—"

Wrath yanked Anir up by his collar, his feet swinging a good inch or two off the ground. I sucked in a quiet breath. It didn't look like lifting a grown man caused any strain for the demon prince at all. "Finish that sentence, and I'll give the other side of your face a scar, too."

"Apologies. Did I strike a nerve?" Anir held up his hands in mock surrender, not bothering to hide his grin. It held no fear and little humor. I decided if I wasn't so aggravated, I might like him. He was either very brave or very foolish to taunt the demon of war. "Don't get pissy. Right now it's only temporary. And she's—"

"Behind us." Wrath dropped the human and he gracefully caught himself from stumbling. "Emilia, this is Anir, my most trusted associate. He knows who agreed to marry Pride next."

I slipped out from the shadows and inspected the young man. "You were there the night I was attacked by the Viperidae."

"Yes." Anir seemed unsure of what else he could or couldn't share.

I turned to Wrath. "He's human."

"You're very astute."

I took a deep breath and counted until the urge to send him back to the bone circle passed. "What I meant is, if you have a human as your associate, why can't he be your anchor? If something were to happen to me, you'd be all right."

Wrath opened his mouth, then shut it. I raised a brow, waiting.

"Anir no longer claims the human world as his, therefore, he cannot provide the same… benefits you can."

Anir snorted, and quickly tried to choke the rest of his laughter down when Wrath turned his blazing glare on him. "That's certainly one way of looking at it."

"What's he talking about?" I asked, staring hard at the demon. "What aren't you telling me?"

Wrath gave me a look that said "a good many things," but didn't bother answering aloud. Instead he said, "Anir was just leaving. He was waiting to see if the robed figure arrived, but they never showed up. Now he's got House business to tend to back home."

"Who's the poor girl?"

"Valentina Rossi."

My whole body went numb as I let that information sink in. Valentina was Claudia's cousin. If anyone would want to readily agree to become the Queen of Hell, Valentina would take up that shadowy mantle with pride. She wasn't bad; she just seemed regal and meant for a role larger than a weaver on our little island. I wasn't surprised she'd be intrigued by a deal with the devil.

I started for her neighborhood. We had to warn her before it was

too late.

Wrath stepped into my path, halting my steps. “What?”

“I know her.”

“And?” he pressed.

“I’m wondering why he’s choosing witches with ties to dark magic.”

“Well,” Anir said, “that’s because the—”

Wrath cut him off. “Time to go.”

As he glanced between the demon prince and me, Anir’s smile was that of a wolf who’d found a squiggling snack it wanted to shove down its throat. “Actually, I’d rather stay here for a while. Demon weddings are not for the faint of heart. Plus, you’ll need some extra eyes and ears when you speak to the girl. Maybe the robed figure will follow us.”

He winked at me like we were the oldest of friends sharing a secret. Wrath caught the look and stared until his “associate” shrugged and started walking across the square. I waited until he was out of earshot before turning to Wrath.

“Are you going to try and convince Valentina to go to the underworld with you?”

“I swore I wouldn’t do anything but offer the bargain. And I will keep my word. However, once we get her to safety, I’d like to see if she’d be willing to help us draw out the murderer.”

“You’d like to use her as bait.”

“Yes. Someone is doing their best to ensure Pride doesn’t break the curse. I intend to discover who and why before anyone else dies. Then I’ll offer a bit of retribution of my own.”

I shivered. It wasn’t exactly what I was expecting him to say, but I appreciated his honesty. “I know Valentina’s family very well. I’m going to tell her to decline Pride’s bargain,” I admitted. “I hope you understand.”

Wrath’s gaze clashed with mine. “Do what you must. The final decision will be up to her.”

While we hurried to Valentina’s home, Anir told me about his life prior to leaving this world for what he called the Kingdom of the Wicked. He was the only child of a Tunisian father and Chinese mother—and had been playing in a nearby olive tree during the brutal slaying of his parents. His father had witnessed a crime and was going to tell authorities what he saw. Before he could do that, they were killed.

Anir said the scar came later, once he’d grown into the sort of

young man others feared. Wrath found him traveling through South America, fighting in underground rings, bruised and bloodied. Some battles were a fight to the death and paid handsomely. Anir was a reigning champion for more than a year when he'd been offered employment in House Wrath.

I stopped listening to them bicker over how many years passed—apparently time moved differently in the demon realms—as we turned down the next street and slipped into a darker, narrower alleyway. A strange tug I'd felt before took control of my senses, drawing me down a second side street.

I glanced around, recognizing the neighborhood, and a terrible feeling settled in. I took a few more steps and stopped, unsurprised by the body. I'd grown suspicious before we'd rounded the corner, and the slumped silhouette was all the confirmation I'd needed.

I scanned the area.

Laundry hung from one crammed building to the other over our heads, and snapped in the breeze like teeth. It might've stricken fear into my heart before, but now it seemed like the perfect cover for a crime. There was no evidence. Nothing to waste time sorting through. It was a targeted job—the killer had gotten in and out, leaving nothing but the body behind.

Wrath abruptly stopped walking.

Anir noticed the victim a moment before tripping over her. He shot the demon an irritated look, and sidestepped a growing lake of blood. "Next time, a little warning would be nice."

"A little less insubordination might make me more amenable to common courtesy in the future."

Anir narrowed his dark eyes. The movement made the scar on his cheek stand out more. Wrath went to step around the body when his associate yanked him to a halt. I watched it all happen as if the scene was playing out on a stage, far from where I actually stood. I couldn't believe another body lay brutalized at our feet. Bile slowly rose. Wrath seemed entirely unaffected, as if coming across maimed bodies was part of his daily life.

The demon turned on his heel, gaze locked onto the human's hand. "What?"

Anir jabbed a finger toward the cooling body. "Aren't we going to send for help?"

"What do you propose we do? Call for human authorities?" Wrath didn't give Anir a chance to answer. "If you were them, would you take our word as good Samaritans and let us be on our way? Or would you look at your demon-forged blade, and my devilish demeanor, and toss us in some shit-filled cell and throw away the key?" Anir pursed his lips but didn't say anything. "Do you have any more noble

suggestions, or can we leave?"

"Sometimes you really are a heartless bastard."

Wrath glanced down at me, his brows drawn together. "Are you all right?"

No, I was most certainly not all right. The body of another murder victim was lying at our feet. And I'd just gotten a look at her face. She was my best friend's cousin. I stared in horrified silence at her broken body. I still couldn't understand how this scene was real. My head spun with shock. Claudia wasn't close with her cousin, but would still feel her loss greatly. I shoved the heels of my hands into my eyes.

"Emilia?"

I shrugged away from Wrath's touch. "That is… was Valentina Rossi."

"I assumed as much."

I couldn't believe another witch had her heart ripped out. This brought the death toll up to five. I fought the bile searing its way up my throat again. Seeing something so horrific… I'd never get used to it.

Francesco, the treacherous human messenger, didn't know the name of the next bride, only the meeting location for Anir. And I doubted Anir would betray Wrath, which meant the information had gotten out some other way. I was nauseated for a new reason—I'd tortured a man for nothing.

"There must be a spy in the kingdom," Anir said, putting my thoughts into words.

I imagined he'd seen his share of horrible things, but he still looked shocked. He pulled his dark hair back, and tied it with a string of leather he ripped from his wrist.

Wrath paced around the alley, careful to avoid stepping in the blood. I averted my gaze from the gore. We needed to send word to the authorities. Valentina couldn't just lay there, cold and alone. The demon stopped close to where I stood, shielding my view of the body. "Which means one of my brothers *is* responsible. Somehow, some way."

My earlier encounter with his brothers sprang to mind. "Greed and Envy are both here."

Wrath shook his head. "Envy wouldn't chance a fight with me. Greed… I still can't see him jeopardizing his House. Not after he's built a formidable stronghold."

"Either way, the implications of a betrayal within the Seven… forget the curse, your highness," Anir said. "Personal feelings about witches aside, finish the marriage bond with Emilia and secure your own House before war comes. You'll need your powers at their fullest. Whoever is organizing this must have killed Pride's wife."

It felt like I'd been drenched in an ice bath. "What marriage bond?"

Anir missed the note of panic in my voice. "The one you started when you bound the prince to you."

Wrath stopped moving. Stopped breathing as I gaped in horror. Time seemed to freeze as I silently repeated what Anir said. I wanted to shout that it wasn't true, but Wrath's reaction said otherwise. The demon prince didn't break my stare. "How?"

"Leave us." Wrath barely spoke above a whisper, but Anir jumped to obey the command. Once he was gone, the demon nodded toward our matching tattoos. "Your protection charm wasn't a bond of protection like a guardian to their ward. The translation of *aevitas ligati* means 'bound forever' as in holy matrimony. It wasn't needed for the summoning to be successful."

"Are we… are you saying we're *betrothed*?" I waited, heart pounding, but Wrath said nothing. He didn't need to. The truth was there in his eyes. He'd known all along what I'd done. No wonder he'd looked so horrified that night. I'd basically ripped him from Hell, and forced him into a betrothal. Forever. "When were you going to tell me?"

His voice came out soft. "This doesn't change anything…"

"Everything's changed." A violent shudder tore through me as the demon continued to hold my unflinching gaze. This was all too much. The body of my best friend's cousin. My accidental engagement to Wrath. "What happens if I don't want to marry you? Will you force me to rule beside you in Hell?"

"Emilia…"

"Don't you *dare*." I shook my head. "Will I be forced to go there?"

"No."

Right. Demon laws were based on civility. Forcing someone into marriage probably broke all of their strangely rigid rules. But I bet he'd fashion a wicked bargain for me and make it so good, so tempting, I'd never say no. Especially if the marriage bond helped give him more power like Anir claimed it would. I locked my hand at my side.

"What did Anir mean by securing your House before there's war?"

A muscle in his jaw ticked. "I cannot share that information with you."

"Then we're through." I clutched my sister's amulet. "*Te libero.* I release you from whatever bond we have. When I marry, it will be for love. Not love of power or whatever other depraved thing you desire. And love is something you soulless, despicable creatures know *nothing* about!"

If he called out to me, or flinched, I wouldn't know. I turned and

fled as far from the demon prince and the newest murder victim as I could. I wanted nothing more to do with the cursed creatures who'd brought this suffering on my family and my city.

From this point forward, I'd find out who murdered my sister on my own.

And Wrath could simply crawl back to Hell and rot with the rest of them.

THIRTY

I sat at a table facing the sea, sipping water with a slice of lemon. I'd left an anonymous note for the police with the location of Valentina's body, and still hadn't gotten over the horror of the night. I wanted to rush to Claudia's, but had to wait until the police told her cousin's family first. If they were already mourning when the authorities showed up, they'd start asking questions. Waiting invited all sorts of thoughts I didn't want to think about. Not now, or ever.

I couldn't believe I'd been so stupid as to accidentally betroth myself to Wrath, and he hadn't let the secret slip sooner. He must have absolutely loathed it. Especially with what Anir said about him hating witches. I fought the urge to bury my face in my hands. Knowing that he was fully aware of my error while I'd thought I was in control… it was humiliating. I didn't want to consider other missteps I'd taken that he'd been too polite to point out.

As soon as I'd tipped off the police, I'd realized I had nowhere to go. I couldn't go back home and put my family at risk. And while I *could* stay at the palace with Wrath, I needed time and space to sort out my thoughts and feelings. A lot happened in a short amount of time. Two more murders. A secret fiancé from Hell. Nonna's attack. My stolen amulet. The Viperidae. It seemed the punches kept on getting thrown, and I was getting battered and bruised in the process.

The harder I clutched at normalcy, the more my world spun into chaos. Since I refused to see Wrath again for the moment, I decided to push everything out of my head and continue searching for answers in Vittoria's death by myself. If I could solve my sister's murder, I could prevent anyone else from dying. Every time I tried putting myself in Vittoria's shoes, I kept coming back to her diary. It didn't give up as many secrets as I'd hoped. And the ones it did reveal were still cryptic enough to keep me guessing.

I was going over a mental list of tasks to accomplish when the seat across from me was pulled out. Wrath dropped into it, eyeing me warily. I stared back at him for a few moments. Neither of us said anything. It seemed like my almost-husband was giving me time to

collect myself. Or maybe he was waiting for me to banish him back to the bone circle again.

I took a few deep breaths.

"How did you know where I was?" He gave me a long, measured look, then glanced pointedly at the tattoo on my arm. I was definitely going to kill him. "You said you could only find me if I accepted the blood trade. You never mentioned the tattoo."

"If I told you the ink was part of a marriage bond, you would have immediately run. I needed you to have time to trust me."

I went to argue, but shut my mouth. It was true. If I'd known what the tattoo meant the first night I'd summoned him, I would have sent him straight back to his realm. "Trust is usually earned because both parties are honest."

"I have not lied to you."

I loosened a breath. "Not technically, no."

A waitress came out and cheerfully recited the menu. Wrath seemed skeptical, but let me do the ordering without complaint. Thirty minutes of strained silence later, she brought out our food. Wrath considered it as if it were a complicated equation he was sorting out.

One steaming plate of scampi, some arancini, a platter of antipasto—stacked with prosciutto, peperoncini, soppressata, provolone, marinated olives, and artichokes tossed with oil, vinegar, oregano, and basil—and a basket of grilled bread graced our little table.

I kept waiting for the demon to pull the waitress aside and ask for warmed blood or raw innards, but he seemed content with my choices and I certainly wasn't going to be the one to put the idea of uncooked offal in his head.

Wrath did surprise me by ordering a pitcher of red wine with orange slices, and poured a generous amount for each of us. I sipped my wine, enjoying the sweetness of it despite myself. I wanted to escape from my dark thoughts for a while, and the dinner and wine were helping. I hadn't slept all night and it felt good to just collect myself and regroup. Wrath piled a plate with food, and slid it in front of me before serving himself. It took all of my concentration to not topple out of my chair from the shock.

He caught my eye and scowled. "Good manners are hard to break, no matter how unpleasant the company I'm forced to keep. Plus, you served me the dessert. It's only fair to return the favor."

I smiled, which seemed to rankle him more, and tucked into my food.

After a few minutes of watching him poking around at the scampi, I skewered one with my fork and held it out to him. His suspicion

deepened. “What are you doing?”

“This is langostino. It’s like a baby lobster. I’m pretty sure you’ll like it. Unless you’re afraid…”

Wrath accepted the shellfish as if in challenge. He must have enjoyed it, because his focus shifted to his plate and he didn’t look up again until he’d sampled a bit of everything.

While he experienced the wonder of human food, I ate my scampi, enjoying the fresh lemon they’d used to cut the richness of the butter. Theirs was a bit heavier with citrus than ours, and I decided to experiment one day soon.

Maybe if I sliced a lemon in half, and grilled it facedown—

I paused, fork to mouth. I’d been enjoying myself so much I almost forgot the reason I was sitting there, with one of the Malvagi, eating. A month. My twin had been gone for a little more than a month, and I was daydreaming about recipes for Sea & Vine while in the company of our worst enemy. The food turned to stone in my stomach.

I pushed my plate away, no longer hungry.

Wrath watched me in a way a human might study a fly buzzing over their dinner. “Experiencing a moral dilemma, witch?”

I couldn’t muster an ounce of anger or annoyance. A hard blade of truth carved into me; I had no idea what I was doing. I was pretty sure my sister had summoned a demon, but didn’t know which one. I knew about the Horn of Hades, but didn’t know how we came to be the keepers of it.

Then there were the cryptic clues in Vittoria’s diary about her ability to hear magical objects, and the possibility of the first book of spells being in this world. I knew my sister agreed to become the devil’s bride, but still hadn’t figured out *why* she’d made that awful choice, or why she didn’t confide in me or our grandmother.

I had more questions than answers, and no one I could fully trust. Nonna almost died because of my quest for justice, and I refused to put anyone else in my family in danger by going to them for anything related to the murder. While Wrath might have saved me, he was a prince of Hell, and even though he’d vowed to not force a witch into a bargain, I still didn’t know how or why he was picked for this mission.

I leaned forward and dropped my voice. “I want to know everything about the curse.”

I stared at him, and his gold eyes—speckled with black—gazed back. “Have you considered moving in with me until we find the murderer?”

A most unexpected deflection. “I have.”

“Where are your belongings?”

“At home.”

He swirled his wine around, and I wondered what, exactly, he was thinking. “Would you like me to escort you there while you retrieve them?”

“I haven’t told you what I’ve decided.” I eyed him. “And I want you to answer my question. If Pride is the one who’s cursed, how does that affect you?”

“We should go back to the palace, and speak there.”

“Not until you give me some answers.”

Wrath looked like he was considering different ways to string me up using my innards. “I will. Later.”

“Now.” I refused to budge on this. He stared up at the sky and I wondered, if he was praying, why he hadn’t glanced down instead.

“Fine. If I answer your questions, will you agree to stay in the palace?”

“No. But it will help me decide. How about that?”

He drew in a long breath and slowly released it. I waited. After fighting some inner battle, I saw the exact moment he decided to confide in me.

“In order for the curse to be fully broken, a consort needs to sit on the throne and help rule House Pride.”

“Anir said the last consort was murdered. How?”

“Her heart was torn from her chest.” He looked at me, but I had a feeling he wasn’t really seeing me anymore. “Along with a few of her royal ladies.”

“Did the First Witch really curse Pride?”

“Yes.”

I allowed that information to settle in with all of the other tales I’d convinced myself were just stories. La Prima Strega was ancient—she’d begun the first line of witches. Or so the old stories went. Supposedly, she was the source of our power and belonged only to herself. No light magic, no dark magic. Just raw power slightly diluted from the goddess who’d birthed her. She predated human La Vecchia Religione—and the Old Religion was *old*.

At times La Prima was idolized, and at others, feared. Daughter of the sun goddess and a demon, she was created as the perfect balance between light and dark. We were told she was immortal, but I’d never seen her and didn’t know anyone else who had, either. I always believed she was no more than a creation myth or legend.

“Why did she curse him?”

Wrath hesitated. “It was punishment for what she thought happened between her firstborn and him.”

I sat up straighter. Claudia had mentioned this. “So, what, he stole her soul and La Prima took her vengeance?”

“Witches would believe that, wouldn’t they?” Wrath scoffed.

“Pride didn’t steal anything. He didn’t have to. Her daughter willingly chose to wed him. They fell in love, despite who they were.”

I thought about what Nonna had started telling me about *Stelle Streghe*, about how they were tasked with being guardians of the Wicked. “She was a star witch?”

Wrath nodded. “She was meant to be a guardian between realms —think of them as wardens of the prison of damnation. Her daughter should have known better, she was supposed to be a soldier first. La Prima, as you call her, commanded her daughter to give up her throne, and return to the coven, but she refused. The First Witch used the darkest kind of magic to remove her daughter’s power and banished her from the coven. It had unforeseen effects for other witches, too. It’s why some give birth to human daughters.”

I mentally sorted out the story. “What you’re saying is…”

True. I stared at him. Our whole lives we’d been told stories about the Wicked, and their lies. Yet Wrath couldn’t directly lie to me because of the summoning magic. I’d tested it and knew it was a fact. What he was saying, no matter how impossible it sounded, had to be true.

Or at least he believed it was.

“Why are you helping him break the curse? If he’s trapped in the underworld, I don’t see why that concerns you or any other prince.”

“Several human years ago, something fractured the gates of Hell. We’d been told it was part of a prophecy. Pride, being who he is, laughed it off. Then his beloved wife was murdered. His powers dampened. He was trapped in Hell, and lesser demons began testing us by trying to slip through cracks in the gates.”

Aside from the curse, I couldn’t believe Hell’s second biggest problem was a rickety old door. I squinted at Wrath. I had a growing suspicion he hadn’t revealed the worst part. “And?”

“Creatures that don’t feel like facing trials in the Portals of a Thousand Fears have slipped through. The gates are continuing to weaken, despite our best efforts. It’s only a matter of time before they completely break. We’ve tried keeping them away, but some things have already arrived in this world.”

“Such as?”

“A few lesser demons.”

“The Viperidae?”

“Not likely. They are summoned.”

It wasn’t exactly comforting. Demons were starting to invade our world. And I had a terrible feeling it would get much worse before it got better. “Anything we should be concerned about in particular then?”

“*You* should be concerned about the Aper demon, for one.”

“The… what?”

“Aper demon. Head of a boar, tusks of an elephant. Huge reptilian bodies, cleft hooves. Dumb as an ox, but they’ve got a particular fondness for witch blood. A thousand tiny teeth in double rows make them very accomplished with swiftly draining a body.”

Wrath’s growing smile was positively wicked as he glanced over my shoulder. A wet snuff near the base of my neck had me breaking an instant sweat. One hoof clattered on the cobblestones, followed by another. The ground vibrated beneath whatever had taken those two mammoth steps. A shadow fell across the table. Sweet goddess above, I *so* did not want to turn around.

“Whatever you do, witch, don’t run.”

THIRTY-ONE

There is no greater threat to a witch than a demon who craves her blood. Once its thirst has been provoked, it will relentlessly pursue the cause of its addiction, stopping only when the source has run dry. To ward against this dark energy, pin a sachet of dried yarrow inside your clothing during each new moon.

—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire

Wrath's warning came a second too late. When I wasn't focused on running for my life, I'd later wonder if it was intentional on his part. I hiked up my skirts and plunged into the twilight-colored streets, the sound of pursuit ringing all around me.

I charged down one narrow alley into the next, jumping over baskets of dried goods. I didn't look back for fear of losing momentum. There was no way I'd end up drained of blood because curiosity got the better of me. As I dodged past closed doors and ducked under laundry lines, the clattering of cloven footsteps behind me never faltered or slowed.

I wasn't just terrified for myself, I worried about any unsuspecting human unfortunate enough to be in my path as I led a hungry demon through the cramped quarters. I almost stumbled as reality crashed into me. A demon was chasing me through the streets of my city. Somehow it had breached the gates of Hell. And, if this was only the beginning… I couldn't finish the thought.

I knocked into an empty barrel, and threw it in the beast's path. My netherworldly attacker halted for all of a second before wood shattered. Not good. My witch blood gave me a little more strength than a human, but the creature tore through the barrel like paper.

My foot caught in a cobblestone, and I couldn't stop morbid curiosity from taking over as I caught myself against a building and tossed a glance over my shoulder. I was ready to freeze from unrelenting horror as Death cornered me, its maw open wide, ready to devour me bones and all, but nothing was there. I warily glanced

around. No demon lurked behind fluttering clothing. No wet-nosed snuffs broke the silence. The complete and utter *unnatural* silence.

Blood and bones.

Chills erupted out of nowhere. Like the first night I'd heard the disembodied voice of an Umbra demon, all sounds of life vanished around me. I wasn't alone—I just couldn't see any danger coming. But I sensed it closing in—a claw-tipped hand reaching out in the dark. Demons must have the ability to cloak themselves with some sort of glamour. Which was just *perfect*.

I turned and ran as fast as I could, and bounced off a body that was ice cold to the touch. I fell and crab-walked backward, slowly dragging my gaze up at my destruction. Apparently I'd been wrong about the glamour. It hadn't been hiding at all—it just moved too fast for me to see it. It wasn't moving now. The Aper demon was everything Wrath described and worse. Its enormous head resembled a wild boar almost perfectly, except for its bright red eyes. Slits of black carved down the middle of the irises, reminding me of a cat straight out of Hell.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Counted to ten, then opened them again. The demon was really there, and it was even worse than the first time I looked at it.

Holy goddess.

Thick globs of black drool dripped down its muzzle as its teeth clicked in anticipation. Its breath smelled like a fetid swamp on a hot summer day. I pushed up onto unsteady legs, and slowly inched away from those vicious, snapping instruments of death. The demon followed.

Every instinct I had shouted for me to flee, but I refused to break eye contact with it. I had a feeling if I turned my back, it'd pounce. No matter what I had to do to survive, I would live to see my family again. The demon moved swiftly when I went to turn left, so I moved in the opposite direction.

We maintained that same slow dance until we were trapped down a dead end. On my right there was a thick steel door with a pawprint holding a stalk of something painted onto the metal. The Aper demon stood before it, snuffing the air. Bloodlust gleamed in its strange red eyes.

Finally remembering the moon-blessed chalk in my pocket, I slowly reached down. One second I was standing, the next I was on the ground with teeth snapping at my neck. Pain shot through me, but was eclipsed by a more immeditate threat. Thousands of teeth were ready to slurp my blood. Hot breath touched my skin, and a low whine from the demon followed. Panic set in. I wouldn't die like this. I couldn't.

I fought wildly, but the demon was too strong. It drew back, ready to sink its teeth in and then… gray sludge exploded from the beast.

A blade shot through where the demon's heart used to be, and shadows writhed like snakes from the wound. I cringed away, watching the dagger pull the shadows in and seemingly absorb the demon's life force. The point stopped just shy of piercing my chest. I held my breath, waiting for Death to defy whoever had stolen its prize and claim me anyway.

I looked up, not into Death's face, but the demon of war's.

Wrath yanked the dead behemoth away and tossed its carcass aside. He sheathed his demon-slaying dagger, then knelt down. His expression was as hard as his tone. Which was helpful—I needed something to focus on besides the overwhelming terror coursing through me.

"Lesson number one: when fighting a demon, always have some weapon at the ready. Whether it's spell chalk or a defensive charm. If you don't have defensive magic, now's the time to acquaint yourself with that part of your lineage. Demons are apex predators. They're faster and stronger than you. Their sole purpose is to kill, and they're very good at it."

I leaned against the building, panting, waiting for the trembling to pass. If Wrath hadn't gotten to me when he did, my family would have buried another child. Well, if there'd been anything left of me *to* bury. Tears pricked my eyes. I'd been forced into a game I knew nothing about and I was losing. Badly.

"Can you stand?"

I could barely breathe. But that had nothing to do with terror anymore, now I was ready to strike out. And I had my sights set on the demon prince looming above me. I maneuvered into a sitting position, and swatted his proffered hand away.

"What, are you my teacher now?"

"An opportunity to turn this into a teachable exercise arose on its own. Lessons were never part of our bargain, so you're welcome."

I stared up at him, speechless at the flash of concern he was too slow to hide. He'd genuinely been worried about me. I was so startled, I forgot to jab him back.

I waited another minute before standing. Wrath's gaze traveled over me a second time.

I glanced down at gelatinous gray globs that I assumed used to be innards of the demon. Now *I* smelled like a fetid swamp. *Fantastico*. I never thought I'd long for the days when stinking of garlic and onion were my biggest worries.

"Do you recognize that symbol?" He nodded toward the door with the pawprint.

“I…” I tried wiping demon sludge from my dress. “I need a minute.”

“For what it’s worth, I wouldn’t have let the demon kill you. Maybe a slight nip.”

“Comforting as ever.”

I stepped up to his side and stared at the door. I’d been terrified over the Aper demon attack, angry with Wrath about the impromptu lesson, and now fear took residence in my thoughts once more. I had no idea which of his brothers would use a pawprint, and wasn’t eager to find out.

“Is this pawprint Envy’s House symbol?” I asked. Wrath shook his head. “Do any of your brothers require a stalk of wheat for their summonings?”

“I believe that’s actually a fennel stalk.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to know how he’d gleaned that from the crude symbol on the door. But it did force puzzle pieces together in my mind. I’d recently seen that symbol before, but couldn’t recall when or where. Possibly somewhere in the city while we’d been wandering the streets. Or maybe in Vittoria’s diary? She’d had plenty of sketches and strange symbols in the margins. I had barely slept and the last few days had taken their toll on my memory. Once we left here, I’d go straight home and grab the diary.

Wrath shot me a sidelong glance. “Want to see what’s inside?”

I most definitely did not. I couldn’t escape a slow, creeping feeling of dread. Maybe it was simply a coincidence that we ended up here, or maybe it was part of a larger, more sinister design. Either way, I felt like we were about to enter a lion’s den, and I was as excited as a fawn knowingly being led to slaughter. I swallowed hard. “Yes.”

Wrath shook his head once before shouldering the door open for us.

“Liar.”

THIRTY-TWO

We walked into a large room that was filled with crates and fishing traps. Ropes hung from rusted nails on the wall. Wooden floors creaked with each of our steps. I wasn't normally prone to feeling uneasy about buildings, but there was something unsettling about the space. A slight, strange humming set my nerves further on edge. Dust motes swirled in the moonlight.

I hoped we'd caused the disturbance and some demons weren't lying in wait. I really didn't want to face any more creatures like the dead demon outside. Wrath was annoyingly unaffected. He strode through the room with the ease of knowing he was the most lethal predator. He inspected the fishing gear, and kicked at a rusty anchor that had been discarded near a back exit.

"It looks like this location hasn't been used in some time," he said.

"Do you believe it was just a coincidence that the Aper demon led me here?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Anything look familiar?"

"I…"

I scanned the space. Fishing nets, ropes, various hooks in strange shapes nailed to the far wall, and wire traps. Everything looked average. Except for that sensation I couldn't name. It felt familiar in a way. I slowly walked around the perimeter, pausing at each piece of fishing gear. There had to be some reason we ended up here. And I was so close to figuring it out…

I picked up a rusted hook and let it fall back against the wall. It was perfectly ordinary.

I blew out a breath. I didn't want to waste time, touching each old hook. Especially when I might possibly have a much better clue waiting for me at home in Vittoria's diary. Still… I couldn't quiet the insistent tug in my center. I did another sweep of the room, but nothing stood out. It seemed that the Aper demon attack and this empty building were unrelated.

"Well?" Wrath asked. "Do you recognize anything?"

Nothing aside from the symbol I was *almost* certain my sister had

sketched in her diary. I shook my head, wanting to hurry to my house to retrieve it. “No.”

“Very well. Let’s go home.”

I didn’t point out that his stolen, ruined palace was not my home and never would be.

“I have to go collect my things,” I said. “I’ll meet you there soon. You should dispose of the demon outside.”

Before he could argue, I slipped out the door and headed to my house.

I slumped against the doorframe in my bedroom and surveyed the carnage. Floorboards were ripped up and broken. Wooden splinters littered the little knotted rug Nonna made for me and Vittoria when we were little. Feathers floated on the breeze blowing in from the shattered window. Someone had taken out *a lot* of aggression on my mattress.

Or something. Wrath said princes of Hell had to be invited into a mortal’s home, but, as I’d recently discovered, that rule didn’t hold true for *all* demons. Lower-caste creatures of Hell seemed to do as they pleased. The Umbra slipped beyond our protection charms, and no formal invitation had been sent to it. Wrath also mentioned magic didn’t work on them the same way it did on corporeal beings, so it was likely more an issue with that than our protection charms.

Which still wasn’t comforting.

Without even fully walking into the room I knew my sister’s diary was long gone, taking her many secrets with it. An Umbra demon was the likely perpetrator of this theft. And that brought Greed back to the top of my suspect list. He was the only prince of Hell thus far that I knew used them to do his bidding.

I wondered about those nights I thought I’d felt someone watching as I drifted into sleep. It was unsettling and invasive, having private moments become a spectacle for prying eyes. All the times I’d gotten dressed, or collapsed in grief. Emotions raw and unchecked because I thought I’d been alone. I glanced out the window, wondering if someone was out there now, watching this latest horror unfold.

I rubbed my hands over my arms, trying to shake the sudden chills. If my bedroom wasn’t on the second floor, and if I didn’t travel through the rest of the house to get here, I’d think the entire place had been ransacked. Aside from my trashed bedroom, the rest of our home was untouched. And so were my family members. Somehow Nonna must not have heard anything unusual, because she was napping peacefully in her bedroom on the lower level. Everyone else was at

Sea & Vine until they completed dinner service. Thank the goddess.

Just to put my mind at ease, I made my way across the debris, and peered into Vittoria's old hiding place. The grimoire pages I'd tucked back in there after I'd summoned Wrath were torn to shreds. Her perfumes smashed. The love notes were missing, along with her diary.

A tear hit the floor. Followed by another. I felt like I was falling, too. Slipping between cracks and losing myself to grief all over again. Seeing Vittoria's things smashed and broken… it was all too much.

I crossed the remnants of what used to be our safe haven, and collapsed onto what was left of my bed. It sank with my weight, sitting cockeyed and wrong. Like everything else in my world.

A sob tore loose. The harder I tried fighting it, the more uncontrollable my sobbing became. How foolish to think I had nothing left to lose. The demons went and proved me wrong. Even if I put our room back together, it would never be the same again.

My sister's belongings and everything she'd loved had been destroyed.

Vittoria had finally been erased from my world. And now I wasn't sure I knew how to go on. I laid on my side and tucked my knees up to my chin and cried. I didn't care if there was an incorporeal demon watching. I didn't care if there was a witch hunter, or prince of Hell, or sadistic human monster delighting in my pain. I lost something I'd never regain, and I mourned.

If the Aper demon was only a small taste of what was to come, my city would spend many nights crying over stolen loved ones. I felt so helpless. So lost and alone. How could I stop such powerful beings? The whole situation seemed impossibly hopeless. I'd been deluding myself into thinking I stood a chance at solving the murders, and saving other lives. I wanted to help, but it wasn't enough. I heaved and hiccupped until I had nothing left. I hated how altered this world had become.

It took a little more time, but I finally dried my tears. The demons stole my sister's life, and would keep taking and taking until they were stopped. So what if I didn't have all the answers? I would do everything I could to stop the gates of Hell from opening. I'd had enough.

I pushed myself up, clutched at my anger, and went to grab my pen and pot of ink. I wrote out a quick note to my family, telling them I loved them, and promised I'd be fine, but I couldn't stay here anymore. I vowed to keep them safe, no matter what.

No one else I loved would be taken from me.

I'd use the darkest of magic to be certain of it.

“How are you doing?” I asked Claudia. Her face was splotchy and her eyes were swollen.

“Please, come in.” She opened the door to her home and I stepped inside. The curtains were all drawn tightly. Glittery black candles burned and flickered on almost every surface, giving off a peppery scent. An altar piled with animal bones and bunches of dried herbs adorned the top of a small chest in the sitting room. A mirror lay against the wall behind it, reflecting the macabre scene back at me. I’d almost forgotten poor Valentina had been murdered.

It felt like a year ago, not just a day.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m not sure. I feel a strange mixture of emotions.” Claudia’s voice was quiet. She motioned for us to sit on a threadbare sofa before the altar of mourning. “At first I felt like someone had ripped out my heart, too. Then I felt numb. And now…” she sniffled, shook her head. She wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“Now you want vengeance.”

She glanced up sharply, and swiped at her nose. “Is that wrong?”

“No. I used to think it was, but not anymore.” I swiveled on the cushion and clutched her hands. “Do you have a spell to make a ward that’s powerful enough to kill a demon if it tries crossing it?”

Claudia’s grip on me tightened and she set her jaw. “I believe so.”

“Even an invisible one?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” I said. “I want you to cast a ward around your home immediately, and mine if you can, too. Do you need blood for the spell?” She dropped her gaze again and nodded. I figured as much. Dark magic demanded payment. I let go of her hands and rolled back one of the sheer sleeves on my blouse. “I’ll just need a knife, two vials, some lavender oil, and a bandage.”

“Emilia, you can’t—”

“I can,” I said, firmly. “I want to help any way I can.”

“All right.” My friend pushed herself to her feet. Her sadness had been replaced by something sharper, angrier. Something I recognized in myself now, too. “I’ll fetch the blade.”

THIRTY-THREE

Wrath didn't utter one word when I barged into his stolen palace and marched up the stairs. I imagined he sensed my raging emotions and was courteous enough to give me a wide berth.

He watched in silence, one annoying brow raised, as I tugged at the bandage on my arm and disappeared from view. On the third floor, down the end of an elegant hallway, I found a room that was five times the size of the bedroom I'd shared with Vittoria.

I should have probably hated it for being so beautiful, but couldn't.

It had ice blue walls with a sunshine-colored tapestry and a four-poster bed—smack in the middle—that I could roll across at least three times and not topple off of. A tiled bathing chamber with a sunken tub and floor-length mirror was attached, and even with a few cracks and chips, I decided it would definitely do.

Though, given the newness of the bed and tapestry, maybe I hadn't been the first person to think I'd like this room. I wanted to be annoyed that Wrath guessed right, but was exhausted and didn't have the capacity to feel much of anything. It had been a long terrible day.

I unpacked my own blanket, flicked it across the mattress, and smoothed it down. I tossed the pillow on next, and even though it wasn't much, it felt a little more like home. Especially since home didn't feel like home after my room had been invaded and destroyed. Before I started crying again, I went into the bathing chamber and turned on the water.

After I scrubbed my face clean and brushed out my hair, I decided my next order of business was a nap. I walked into my room and halted. Wrath sprawled across my commandeered bed, one arm draped over his torso, the other bent behind his dark head.

His position was forced casual, but the sharpness of his gaze gave his tension away. He was dressed in black again, and looked like the kind of man who'd wear it from head to toe. I wondered who he planned on beating tonight, given his reasons for liking the color so much.

“Are you all right?”

I crossed my arms and gave him a flat look. “No.”

He narrowed his eyes, his attention fixed on my bandage. “What happened?”

I lifted a shoulder. I wasn’t in the mood to answer his questions. But I wanted him to answer some of mine. “Greed and Envy both want the Horn of Hades. You must want it, too. Why not take this half from me?”

Wrath didn’t rise to the bait, but his expression hardened along with his tone. “Why don’t you just ask the question you’re really interested in knowing?”

“My sister’s diary was stolen. Someone ripped our room apart and destroyed her things.”

“And you believe I had something to do with it?” His eyes appraised me. “It’s not just a diary, is it?”

“No.” I blew out a frustrated breath. “She placed some locking spell on it, using demon magic. I managed to break it, but it didn’t give me the answers I’d been looking for.”

Wrath quietly considered the information I shared. It was a peace offering for snapping at him, and he looked like he understood that. “I would have helped you break the spell if you asked me to.”

I crossed the room and flopped onto the bed next to him, ignoring the indignant glare he shot in my direction as he bounced in place. I was bone tired, and just wanted the day to be over. After the revelation about the gates of Hell weakening, my next priority was to find my amulet. If I had the whole Horn of Hades, I might be able to lock the gates before any other demons broke free. But I needed to get some sleep so I could think straight. “Do we have anything planned tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Has someone else made a deal with Pride?”

He nodded. “Isabella Crisci.”

“When do we leave?”

“Dusk.”

I tugged the pillow out from behind him, stuffed it under my head, and closed my eyes. A solid thirty seconds of blessed silence passed before he poked me in the ribs. I cracked an eye. “Do that again, and I’ll slap you with a containment spell.”

“What are you doing?”

“Preparing for war. Now go away.”

He muttered something under his breath I didn’t catch. Nor did I care to. I hadn’t been entirely sarcastic. I needed to be well rested and sharp to find my *cornicello,* and to prepare for whatever other hellish nightmare the evening would bring.

When I woke up several blissful hours later, Wrath was gone. Thank the stars. Sometimes, especially when I was exhausted, I had a tendency to roll around and talk in my sleep. Vittoria used to tease me endlessly, which was embarrassing enough, but it would have been painfully awkward if it happened in front of the demon prince.

I sat up and a blanket that had been carefully placed over me fell away. I glanced at it, frowning. I was almost positive I'd fallen asleep on top of it.

"Hello?"

I scanned the silent, empty room. Wrath wasn't lurking. Not that I expected him to be. It took a moment for me to realize why. It was almost dark outside, and he'd said we needed to leave at dusk. I hopped up from bed and raced down the stairs, yelling the demon's name.

All was as still as the catacombs.

"Blood and bones." The no-good prince left me to go speak to the witch on his own. I marched around the empty palace, seething. He should have woken me up. I had as much right to be there when he talked with Isabella as he did. Wrath obviously didn't want me to potentially dissuade her from accepting the devil's bargain. So much for being partners. I was so mad I could scream.

After the day I'd had, I needed to get my frustration out. I couldn't just sit around, waiting for someone else to make a move. Especially now that I felt invisible hands tick, tick, ticking away the time that remained before the gates of Hell broke entirely. I couldn't waste energy being angry. I had to go out and see if I could find my *cornicello*. I went back to my room and noticed a dress had been draped over a chair in the corner.

I picked it up. It was midnight black with gold roots sewn across the bodice, similar to the grimoire page I'd used to summon Wrath. Tiny serpents were also woven into the design. Exquisite didn't come close to describing it.

"Testa di cazzo." Only an asshole would think a pretty dress made up for a broken promise, though.

I slipped it on anyway. It suited my needs for tonight.

I whispered a prayer to the goddess of good fortune, and hoped she'd bless me with a little luck.

I didn't know where I was going, but I subtly held on to my sister's

cornicello and followed a whisper of a feeling. It had worked when I'd needed to find Greed's gambling den, so I decided to think about my amulet and see what happened. I wasn't sure what I was sensing now, but I followed the feeling as it grew stronger.

I marched up steep streets clinging to cliffs and finally stopped to stare out at the sea. Multicolored fishing boats swayed just offshore.

It was peaceful, but I had no business stopping to admire the mundane world I no longer was a part of. Not that I'd ever really belonged. But before all of this, I could at least pretend.

I took a few steps past the cliff, and the whisper calling to me stopped. I retraced my path and it returned. I scanned the area, watching a bonfire as it started glowing below me. There was something here the magic wanted me to find. A shadowy group of people began gathering in a cove tucked into a space between two towering cliffs, mostly hidden from view. It was a nice night for a seaside party. I envied the people down there for their ignorance of all the creatures of the night.

I held Vittoria's *cornicello* in my fist and squeezed my eyes shut, silently commanding it to lead me to my own amulet. There was no time for parties or frivolity. I lifted my foot to start off again, but something wouldn't let me go.

I opened my eyes and glared down at the party. If my sister were alive, she'd be down there with them, dancing. I could almost picture her there now, swaying and laughing. Her arms thrown up to praise the full moon. I wanted her to be here so badly my eyes stung. I let go of her amulet and took a deep breath. Vittoria would have dragged me down there to dance and drink and live.

And now she was dead and I was standing up here, alone.

A powerful, glittering magic filled my veins. I was angrier than I'd been in a while. And maybe it was that fierce anger that made me decide to forget about finding my *cornicello.* There were twelve other witch families living secretly in Palermo. Any number of them could try and stop the demons from invading our world. And yet, no one had. Maybe I *would* be more like my twin. I'd dance and laugh and forget the world was a lonely, scary place for a few hours. There would still be nightmares to fight tomorrow and other battles to wage. Tonight I wanted to pretend things were normal.

Even if it was a lie. Everyone else seemed content to live in a fantasy world. They couldn't blame me for wanting to experience that for an hour, too. And who knows? Maybe if I found a way to release some stress I'd be able to think more clearly.

Decision made, I followed the steep, narrow path to the water and sounds of merriment. I ran my fingers over tall grass, taking careful steps down stairs carved into the cliffside.

In the distance, fishermen blew into seashell horns. The sea whispered, soft, fierce. Waves lapped the shore. Gulls cawed. Whispers followed me, taunted me, just out of earshot.

The goddess cried out in warning.

Caught up in my thoughts, I hadn't been listening to the signs. An overwhelming sense of fear crashed into me when my feet hit the sand, but by then it was too late.

I'd already reached the raging bonfire.

THIRTY-FOUR

Moon Daughter Rituals should be observed during each full moon. To release that which no longer serves you, you'll need a pale blue candle, bowl of water, pen, paper, and a handful of sage to burn.

—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire

It started innocently, like Pleasure took human form and dragged a cool finger down my spine, tracing little circles over my flushed skin. I lifted my arms and arched into the sensation. Happiness, pure, radiant, and all-consuming, filled me.

If I'd been angry a moment before, standing high up on the cliffs, it was a forgotten memory the second I walked across the sand. If I'd been worried about invading demons, I no longer could recall why. Now all I knew was bliss.

I was so preoccupied with happiness, I just wanted to dance; sway my hips and feel another body moving in time with mine. Rhythmic, joyful, unfettered. As if my desire summoned a dance partner, invisible hands roved across my bodice, down my sides, gripped my bottom.

I gasped. I didn't slap my bold partner. They'd given me what I wanted the second the thought entered my mind. And I *liked* it.

Music and laughter drummed all around. The beat was life. Enticing. It called to my most primal witch instincts. I moved without thought, giving myself over completely to nature and my senses. I spun away from my invisible dance partner, and my skirts and hair flew around.

The serpent and root dress I'd slipped on earlier reminded me of the wilderness—I tossed my head back and soaked up the dying rays of the sun. Maybe I'd left my body and was a cloud. It felt so good to just be free, to move and forget. Here, near the crackling fire and invisible dancing people, I didn't think about murders, or curses, or creatures of the underworld, and the devil's horns.

I didn't think about stolen amulets and diaries.

Dancing, down here on the beach, I only knew peace and joy and pleasure. I didn't need to worry about anything. I could stay here, drifting from one good sensation to the next, forever. He was coming for me. My king. My damnation. I don't know how I knew, but I did.

Balance. Light and dark. The sun and moon. Good and evil. A snake winding through a bed of wildflowers. Offering a taste of the most forbidden fruit. Scales of justice were tipped; a choice hanging there for me to decide. To right a wrong, or damn us all.

A tiny voice screamed in warning, this was all terribly *wrong,* but was silenced as music and movement swept around me, through me. Whispers grew louder, more frantic. I shoved them aside.

I must have kicked off my sandals, my soles slipped over warm sand, and I was overcome with the sensation of it. Everything felt so *good*. So intense. Like all my pleasure receptors had been spelled a hundred times their normal rate. I didn't know I was capable of so much *feeling*.

I wriggled my toes, laughing as grains of sand slipped between them, tickling and teasing. Someone handed me a glass of wine and I drank deeply. It tasted sweet, strong. Apples dipped in honey and blessed by the stars. It was one of the most delicious things I'd ever had. Vittoria would have loved it. I gulped more—maybe to forget, maybe because I wanted it.

Then my glass was gone and I was pulled into another dance.

I wanted to stay here for eternity, lost to these good feelings. And it felt like I had. Here I didn't have to feel grief. I didn't have to mourn. Here I could simply live.

Minutes passed, maybe hours or days; time had no meaning. I moved and swayed, closed my eyes and listened to the enchanting sounds of the water, the murmurs of voices that belonged to people I couldn't see. Those invisible hands from earlier became bold explorers, mapping the uncharted territory that was my body. They slid down, lower…

"Remember." A strange voice whispered to me. *"Inferus sicut superus."*

As above, so below. There was a memory buried there, skirting the outside of my mind.

Something piercing in my arm, cold and sharp, jolted me from my trance. My eyes flew open. Fear reached icy tendrils out to me again, but just as quickly as it happened, it was gone. Replaced with pleasure. Rapture. Complete and total freedom from all thought. I liked it there, deep in a cocoon of oblivion. Then I saw him.

He cut through the crowded beach like a blade, his anger setting the peaceful joy ablaze. My invisible dance partner vanished, but I hardly noticed. There was a much more interesting creature stalking

closer. The most terrifying and feral. Vaguely, I felt I should run in the other direction. That he was a carnivorous beast and I was a lamb, stumbling ever closer to danger. Amidst a group of shadowy figures, he burned brightly—the only form that wasn't hidden.

I thought about fire, about plumes of smoke and flames licking the air. Which made me think about dragging my tongue over *him,* seeing if he was as hot as the energy steaming off him. Drums beat. My heart pounded. I wanted to experience pleasure on all levels.

I wanted a spell to bottle this feeling and sip from it whenever I desired.

Magic was life and life was made by making love and feeling good and our bodies constantly tried to remind us to *live*. I'd spent the last several weeks consumed by death and destruction—I needed balance. I deserved it. As above, so below.

He stopped before me, his expression wary. "Time to go, witch."

Hardly. I twirled away, but he grabbed my hand, spinning me back until I crashed against his body. Heat poured off him, enveloped me. I had the strangest feeling I should hate it. "Hello, demon. Let's dance."

"You need to get out of here. Immediately."

"Why?"

"Because you're tearing your clothes off and looking at me like mine are next."

I glanced down and laughed in surprise. I was *trying* to undo the stays of my bodice, but he thwarted my efforts. His tattooed hand covered mine. I looked up at him, my brow crinkled. "Don't you want to see me naked?"

"I have."

"And?"

"If you still want to rip your clothes off when we get home, we can discuss it then."

A blast of ice on my arm doused flames of desire. Then they were back with a vengeance. I gave up trying to remove my dress and focused on him. I went for the button on his trousers, and he deftly moved back. He was a difficult creature. I placed my hands on his chest and dragged them down instead. Power thrummed beneath my touch. Responded to me. It was intoxicating.

"For the living embodiment of sin, you aren't very sinful."

I tugged him close. Drums beat. Passion stirred. He closed his eyes. I pressed closer, and he didn't stop me this time. The music grew sultry. I swayed automatically against him. I wanted him to swing me up into his arms, and dance us across the sky.

The stubborn demon didn't move.

"Why won't you touch me?" I ran my thumb across the seam of

his lips and he gently bit down, holding my finger in place. If he meant it as a deterrent, it wasn't working. He opened his eyes and I was struck by the beauty of them. "Is it because I'm a witch?"

He trailed big hands down my arms. I leaned in, waiting for him to crush his lips against mine. In the far reaches of my mind, I recalled him saying one day I'd beg him to kiss me. That I'd love it or loathe it, but still crave it. He hadn't been wrong. I hated him… for denying me. The anticipation was building to a point that was almost painful. When he finally dragged his hands to my wrists, instead of pulling me closer, he gently pushed me back, holding me at arm's length.

"There are many reasons. One of which is because you're under my brother's influence." He glanced over my shoulder, his expression forbidding. "Lust."

Intrigued, I slowly turned. Desire scorched every last sentient thought I had. The Prince of Lust was golden skinned, dark haired, and had a body Michelangelo probably used as inspiration for his sculptures. I didn't just want him, I *needed* him. I craved his attention as much as I longed for his touch.

"Hello, Signorina di Carlo. You're absolutely delicious, aren't you?"

His voice was unearthly. Pleasure mixed with pain. I was enraptured and terrified. Ice prickled my arm. The same insistent feeling that kept haunting me. It dulled my emotions long enough for me to fully grasp the horror of what was happening. What he was doing.

Lust was using his influence on me. And it was worse than Envy by far. He made me feel so good, so happy, I forgot who I was. What I wanted. And what I hated above all. Or maybe I didn't entirely forget my hatred, but I certainly didn't care. Passionate flames razed my conscious thought, and I was once again gripped by pure animalistic need. I had a lust for life, for fun, for…

The demon prince circled me. He wore an unbuttoned, silver suit jacket—without a shirt—and matching trousers that hung so low on his hips, I could die. A circlet of flames sat on his head. His eyes were charcoal. Penetrating. In them I saw a bottomless pool of desire. I wanted to tear off my clothes and dive in.

I started moving toward him, but someone grabbed me around the waist. I stopped trying to escape, focusing instead on the warmth behind me. The solid frame. The power. I'd almost forgotten how much I wanted *him*.

Lust must have sensed my shifting emotions. He looked from me to his brother, his expression indescribable. He started speaking, but I was distracted by too many sensations. His voice, the warm breeze, the scent of Wrath, and the friction of his strong arms as he held me in

place. Lust kept talking. My mind tried to focus on his words, not the shape of his lips.

He stepped close to where we stood. Wrath's arms were bands of steel around me. "Do you know what that means, witch?" I drew my brows together. His smile was crafted of beautiful nightmares. "Go, dance. Enjoy the party. This is a practice round before the Feast of the Wolf."

A familiar scent wafted toward me, beckoning. Lavender and white sage. Vittoria! She was here… if I left to go dancing I'd find—

Stop, the same voice whispered in the back of my head. It was a trick. Vittoria was dead.

"No."

I was as startled by my refusal as Lust was. His expression turned from desire to fury.

He snapped his fingers and his influence over me vanished. My knees buckled. If Wrath wasn't holding me, I would have fallen. All the happiness and bliss I'd felt were ripped away, leaving me hollow and trembling. Terror coursed through me. What he'd done… the things I'd felt. I wanted to claw my skin off. Or maybe I wanted to sink my nails into him, the creature who'd violated my emotions. Who made me forget and want things I should fear. The wine I'd had suddenly made a reappearance; I bent over, hurling everything up. Wrath didn't let go.

"Why are you here?" Wrath's voice was quiet, low. A chill slid down my spine.

"To deliver a message, dear brother. You're needed at home. Immediately." His gaze cut to me. "Don't worry. I'll watch over your little friend. I have much to tell her. Stories of demons and witches. Villains and heroes. Curses and a king's vengeance."

"No." My fingers dug into Wrath's forearm. "P-please."

I don't know if it was the way my voice broke, or if he'd been waiting for an opportunity for his own reasons, but one second Wrath had me in his arms, and the next I was behind him and his blade was buried deep in Lust's chest. Bones crunched. He twisted the dagger up, dark blood poured from the wound.

"Don't come back here again. I'll go home when I'm ready." He yanked the dagger out, wiped it across his pants. And waited. "See you in Hell, brother."

I wasn't sure what disturbed me more—the cold indifference on Wrath's face as he watched his brother die, or the brutal efficiency of the attack.

I knew he was dangerous, but seeing it…

Lust coughed, glanced down at his mortal wound. And was suddenly gone. As in, vanished completely from sight, like he'd never

been here.

I collapsed on the beach, staring at the space the demonic prince once occupied. Tears streamed down my face. I heaved again and Wrath watched impassively. After I stopped retching, he knelt beside me. I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye. "Is he dead?"

"No. Being struck with a House blade only severs ties to this realm. He's back in the kingdom, and won't be able to use his powers for a while."

A small blessing amidst the curse. "Good."

Wrath handed me a cloth to wipe my face. I don't know where he pulled it from, and I didn't care. "Lust takes the pleasant emotions you have and inflates them. You might experience a void now. Picture it like a well—his influence rapidly depletes the supply. Where you were once blissfully happy, you'll feel a sharp contrast. It is a hell in its own way. Giving someone ultimate pleasure, only to rip it from them before they fully grasp it. Done often enough, it drives mortals mad. You should be all right soon enough, though."

"He wouldn't have…" I fisted my hands at my side. "Made me…"

Wrath shook his head. "No."

"But I felt—there were invisible hands." I also didn't forget how hard I'd been trying to take my clothes off in front of Wrath. Or how much I'd wanted him to touch me.

"Manifestations of your desire. They were a part of you, not anyone or anything else."

There was little comfort in that. Lust might not have violated me physically, but the emotional manipulation was equally bad. He'd twisted goodness until it was cloaked in evil. Wrath was right. It did feel like I'd crashed—like I'd been soaring, and the wind abruptly stopped and I was plunged into the frigid sea depths below. A vast abyss of nothing swallowed me.

I wanted to curl up on the ground, and sleep for eternity. I didn't care about the curse. Or the nagging feeling I'd learned something important. I no longer worried about my sister's murder. Or vengeance. Nothing mattered anymore.

I must have said that last part out loud.

Wrath reached over and lightly brushed blood-smeared knuckles against the side of my neck. The exact place I thought he'd kissed me the night he'd saved me from the Viperidae. I shivered and he dropped his hand.

"Valeas." Be strong. "It will again soon."

THIRTY-FIVE

"Soon" turned into a week. I hardly noticed the passage of time. I stayed in bed, locked the sunlight out, and refused to bathe. I had little energy and less reason to care. I didn't visit my family, or the restaurant. I didn't look for my amulet, or think about the gates of Hell. I barely slept. When I did, I kept hearing a strange voice. When I awoke, the urgent message was forgotten.

I didn't care. It didn't matter.

The world felt like it was caving in around me, and sometimes I'd gasp for what felt like hours, unable to draw in enough breath. Life hurt. All pleasure was gone. Anything that once held meaning was long forgotten, buried deep in a void I couldn't break through. My sister was a faraway memory. Vengeance was rooted in passion, and therefore I had nothing left of it, either.

If Wrath was angry or annoyed by my inability to shake off the last vestiges of his brother's power, he didn't let it show. At least not in the ways I expected.

He wasn't always the most gracious or patient nursemaid. But he was never far, always prowling around near my borrowed room in the ruined palace. Sometimes, when I was in that foggy place between sleep and wakefulness, I saw him camped out in a chair beside my bed. His hair and clothing both rumpled. Once, I thought he held my hand. But when I roused myself from that near-impenetrable haziness, he was gone. He brought food three times a day and when I refused to eat, he'd sit there, glowering until I did. Fighting him took too much energy. So I ate.

Sometimes I'd stare at the careful lines of his tattoos. Up close, the metallic snake that started on his right hand and curled up and around to his shoulder was a masterpiece—each scale shimmered. It was more than gold, there were bits of silver and charcoal—shadows and light. I stared blankly at it while he brought my next meal. I wondered if our matching tattoos would evolve with intricate details over time. I stopped caring.

He held out more food.

Globes of plump red grapes. Hunks of hard cheese. Warmed milk sweetened with honey and spices. Cured meats and other things I stopped paying attention to. He was a mighty hunter bringing home spoils of war. I wondered when he'd give up and let me be.

"When you start doing it on your own."

I didn't think I'd asked aloud. I didn't care if he read my mind. I pushed his handful of grapes away, rolled onto my side. And let the world around me fade.

Somewhere, in the distance, I thought I heard Wrath speaking. He was telling me a story about a witch. One day her heart had been ripped from her, not physically, but emotionally. The void was only filled when she went out hunting for vengeance, and even then her grief was never far. Then, when she'd been close to discovering some long-forgotten secret, she met a terrible prince. He delighted in taking what little pleasure she'd clung to, leaving her empty and vulnerable.

I tuned out the sound of Wrath's voice. I didn't care for this story. I knew the ending.

Vittoria was gone. I'd been fighting grief over her loss with all I had, gripping my pursuit of justice like it was my only tether to the world.

Now that my will to cling to it was gone, there was nothing left.

Two weeks was where his patience ended, apparently. One morning, or evening—I'd stopped paying attention—I was scooped from bed and unceremoniously dumped into a waiting bath, clothes and all. I bobbed up from the water, pushed tangles of hair from my face, and glared at the demon. He glared right back and a tiny spark of anger finally ignited.

"Have you completely lost your damn—"

My scolding died when I took in the peculiar scene around us.

Candles set in a circle on the floor dripped waxy tears, their flames offering a soft glow against the twilight streaming in. I couldn't tell if it was dusk or dawn. The windows were thrown open, allowing fresh air to glide around the bathing room. At some point, during my convalescence, Wrath had hung window coverings. Beautiful gauze panels fluttered in the wind.

He hadn't stopped redecorating there.

A line of sand circled the tub along with dozens of fragrant orange blossoms and plumeria. My favorite flowers. My gaze shot to him in accusation. "What is this?"

"Representations of each element." He nodded to the items in question. "Earth, air, fire, and water. I take it I don't need to explain

further."

He didn't. I knew exactly what it meant. They were offerings for the goddesses to help guide a moon daughter back from darkness. I glanced around the chamber again, my pulse soothing. Adding orange blossoms and plumeria was a bit much—the sand would have done just fine for the earth portion of the ritual. I didn't point that out, though. I was… surprised the demon even knew this much of our ways. I relaxed against the lip of the tub and closed my eyes, letting the magic of the elements seep into my soul. A drowsy peace settled deep within me.

I heard retreating footsteps and waited until he was almost gone. "Thank you."

He must have heard me. I didn't whisper and—even with the windows open—there were no other noises drifting up from the streets. But the only reply he offered was the soft click of the door closing behind him. I inhaled the pleasing scent of orange blossoms and drifted off. Later, I'd pick some of them up and weave them into my hair. As I slipped deeper into the water, I finally understood why he'd brought the flowers. They weren't meant for the ritual. They were for me.

Their fragrance was the first bit of true pleasure I felt after mine had been stolen away.

THIRTY-SIX

"**There are victors** and victims. Decide who you want to be. Or the choice will be made for you, witch. And I doubt you'll like it."

I threw my head back and groaned. "It's a game of scopa, not a battle between life and death. Are you always this dramatic?"

Wrath scowled from behind his hand-painted cards. "Valuable lessons are often learned from games of strategy. Only fools discredit them."

"And only an ornery creature from Hell gets this serious over a simple card game."

I plucked another cannoli from the plate Wrath had set on my bed. When I'd come out of the bath wrapped in my new silky robe, he'd been waiting with the dessert and cards. He subtly watched as I devoured another one, seeming pleased he'd done an acceptable job at remembering the sort of human food I loved. I'd mistakenly assumed more relaxation was part of his master plan to restore me to optimum health and well-being.

I had no idea we'd be playing at war games. I suddenly longed for the bath again.

The elemental blessing worked wonders for my emotions. I was ready to get back out, and solve the mystery surrounding my sister's murder. And find my missing amulet. At least in theory. In reality, I was petrified of running into another prince of Hell. Each one I'd met thus far had been worse than the last.

"How long does it take for a demon prince to restore themselves after they're—"

"Gutted?"

"I thought you aimed for his heart, actually."

"I punctured a lung. Maybe broke a few ribs." His tone was filled with disappointment. "I imagine he's almost healed already." He looked me over. "He won't bother you again."

"Right. A prince of Hell who delights in tormenting others by removing all happiness and pleasure will suddenly grow a conscience, and never attempt *that* nasty trick again."

“Oh, he’ll definitely try again. But you’re going to stop him.”

I gulped down the last bite of my third cannoli, suddenly feeling queasy. “Is there a spell or charm that mitigates demonic influence? Irish carve crosses from rowan wood and wear them to keep fae away. You must have objects that offer protection from you, too.”

He was silent for an uncomfortably long beat. I glanced up, and fought the urge to flinch. It was becoming too easy to forget what he really was. Then, there were glimpses like this, which made me worry about when *he* might be the one to turn his influence loose on me.

“Me and mine make monsters wary, witch. I do not fear, I *am* fear. Twigs and berries and iron imprison the weak. Do you think I’m weak?” I shook my head and Wrath bared his teeth in a grin that was downright petrifying. “Are you scared?”

I swallowed hard. “No.”

He stared at me for a minute, but didn’t call me on the lie. “My world is broken down into one simple principle: *I believe I’m powerful, therefore I am*. If I am convinced of my abilities, others will pick up on my confidence. It will give them pause, if only for a second, while they reevaluate a potential threat. Any advantage you can give yourself will be helpful when dealing with my brothers. Their motto will always be ‘know thy enemy.’ Make that difficult. So to answer your question, no, you do not need a spell or charm or trinket of false protection. You need to trust in yourself and your power. Or they will torture and taunt you for eternity.”

Once my heart stopped thrashing, I flashed him a skeptical look. “You think I can achieve all that by playing cards?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, let’s say you’re right. How can a game of scopa prepare me for successfully battling a prince of Hell?”

“Life often deals you a hand you didn’t choose.” Wrath settled back, the tension in the room releasing with him. He studied his cards carefully, then placed one on the table. A sweep. I cursed. It was the third time in a row he’d done that. “It’s how you end up playing it to your advantage that counts.”

I scoffed. “That was luck, not strategy.”

“Both are needed. But it can be argued that luck improves with a well-thought-out strategy.” He glanced up. “You live by archaic notions of light and dark magic when power is neither good nor bad. It’s intent that really matters. By not studying *all* power, you’ve closed off options. Not honing each weapon in your arsenal is a poor strategy on your part.”

“Nonna would love that advice.”

His gaze hardened. “If your grandmother is against you learning to defend yourself, I’d start asking questions.” Wrath took a steadying

breath, his tone turning more pleasant. “If you want to become a real player in this game of murder and deceit, start by studying your opponents. Know who they are, what they want, and watch them closely. Once you’re well acquainted with their habits, you’ll easily spot lies.” One side of his mouth lifted as I lost another hand and cursed the devil. “Work on your emotions. You’re ruled by fire—and are easily angered and excited. Qualities that are not bad in certain instances, but are detrimental when facing your enemy. Do not make it easy for them to read you. They will certainly be doing everything they can to thwart your efforts at uncovering their truth.”

“Have you ever considered teaching classes in Hell? You certainly love to give lessons.”

“Mock me all you like. It doesn’t negate the fact I’m right.”

“And oh so humble about it.”

“The world and its inhabitants are constantly changing, therefore we princes of Hell continue to sharpen our minds and skills. It is the absence of arrogance that allows us to remain the most feared. We do not believe we know all, we believe in adaptation. Adopt those same principles or you’ll end up extinct.”

“I believe you love the sound of your own voice. Maybe you should let me teach you about experiencing a wider range of emotions.”

“One day, maybe I will.”

He set his cards aside and studied me. I couldn’t tell if the dark gleam in his eyes was that of a predator circling its prey, or the sign of mild interest for other purposes. Or maybe… maybe he was admiring me in that way that someone did when they were noticing you for the first time in a different light. Stranger still, I wasn’t sure which one I hoped for more.

A flash of my desires on the beach crossed my mind.

My pulse ticked faster as he slowly leaned forward, his gaze searing into mine. For one moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. He abruptly sat back. I released a breath.

“When you first stepped onto the beach, I imagine you sensed demonic influence. Being aware is the key to fighting it. Our power lies in sensing your emotions, inflating the ones we thrive on. Once you realize that, you have the power to shift your focus and feelings elsewhere. At any moment you could have walked away from Lust’s gathering. You just needed to believe you could.”

“Are you suggesting what he did was *my* fault?”

Wrath stood. I hadn’t noticed how finely he was dressed, or the care he’d taken with styling his hair. He wore an inky black jacket with gold snakes embroidered on the lapels, black trousers, and boots that gleamed from a recent buffing. A few rings even glittered on his

fingers. Onyx and gold, his favorite colors. He looked… good. He noticed where my attention had shifted and one side of his mouth edged up.

"I'm suggesting you have untapped power, Emilia. Twist my words, twist the meanings all you like. Such is the mortal way."

"I'm not twisting and I'm not human. Your brothers are sadistic."

"Princes of Hell are neither good nor evil. We just *are*."

"Yeah. They just *are* malicious monsters."

"And yet, you keep saying 'they' and don't include me in your assessment of my brothers." Wrath shook his head. "Why is that?"

"I…" I inhaled deeply. "Because so far, Greed, Envy, and Lust have all done terrible things. You haven't. But that's probably just because of the spell I used on you."

Wrath no longer looked amused. "Practice reading people, especially when their expressions seem cold or remote. Look for their mouth tightening, their eyes darting away. Any wince or minute sign of their true feelings when you're asking uncomfortable questions."

"Any other tips, adaptable one?"

"You live in a realm of free will—accept that and you've already defeated your foes. You *always* have the power of choice, even when those choices seem limited. Never forget that."

"Oh, really? *Always?*" My anger flamed. "Did my sister have a choice to live or die? Because I'm pretty sure someone else decided that for her."

"There are worse fates, witch."

"Such as?"

"Living in my world." He turned and headed for the door. "I'll be back in a little while. If you get bored, check the dresser by your bed." He paused in the corridor and glanced over his shoulder. "I don't suggest leaving the palace tonight."

"Why not?" I called after him.

He didn't bother answering, he was already gone. I wondered about his clothing, about the way he'd combed his hair. He looked like he wanted to make an impression.

I got up and paced around the room, peered out the window, then plopped back onto the bed. I absently twisted a lock of my hair, thinking about everything he'd said about victors and victims. Then I started thinking about free will and choices. And *then* I started to get annoyed that he was being a hypocrite by infringing on mine.

I sat for twenty minutes, contemplating why, if I had free will, I was listening to him. I had important things to do and had wasted enough time. I dressed in a simple dark gray sleeveless gown he must have recently acquired, and stole into the quickly falling night.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Candles of Darkness should only be used under the direst of circumstances. Light a navy or deep purple candle, sprinkle a handful of niter powder around its base, and call forth evil from the farthest reaches of the north and south.

—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire

Moonlight spilled like silver blood across the rooftops, and dribbled onto the streets. It was still early enough that quite a few people were out. Some carried packages from the market, others hurried along, looking tired and worn from a hard day's work.

Thanks to the recharging nature of the elemental bath I wasn't tired or drained anymore, but the last several weeks had taken their toll. When I'd stuck orange blossoms in my hair before leaving, I noticed the sharpness of my gaze, and the gleam of suspicion that hadn't been present before. I was still the same Emilia, just a bit more cautious and on edge. I thought back to my sister's final weeks and wondered how, if she'd encountered any of the princes of Hell, she'd hidden it from us.

Maybe she *had* been on edge, shaky. And maybe that was why Nonna had been pointing out all the signs from the goddesses. She knew the storm was coming. I'd been too focused on refuting fantastical claims to notice.

I hurried through the streets, grateful I wasn't alone. I didn't want to run into any demons, royal or otherwise. Remaining in the magically protected palace was undoubtedly wise, but I couldn't hide from my many enemies forever. Staying there also wouldn't help me hone my skills with watching people speak, and seeing if they lied. Each day that came and went could bring a new witch murder. When I'd finally shaken off the last of my demonically induced despair, I'd thought about something I'd missed before. Something that might not mean anything, or it could tie everything together. The monastery.

I couldn't stop wondering why my sister had been there two nights in a row. After Vittoria had been passed up for preparing the

bodies of the dead, she hardly ever stepped foot in there. I thought about the summoning circle located in the chamber where my twin died. If she didn't set it up, that meant someone else did. Someone who might be responsible for summoning Greed and Envy. Maybe I could catch them in the act of making another circle. It wasn't much, but it was something.

Thanks to Lust's demonic influence, I'd lost the last two weeks and —

Claudia paced the small courtyard separating the dormitory from the monastery. Tears streamed down her face. She yanked at her hair, mumbling. Her skirts were dirty and torn, dark rusty splotches splattered her bodice. I rushed to her side; she didn't seem to notice me. She was an absolute mess—which wasn't surprising considering her cousin's murder a couple of weeks ago.

"Claudia?" I cautiously reached for her. She refused to look up. "Are you all right?"

"They said not to use them. To never use them."

"Use what?"

"Bones and black mirrors. Black mirrors and bones. Piles of bodies and ashes of the fallen. Bones of the dead, and the dead are dust because I've seen the raven's wings beating against the crescent moon. The moon is a fang, waiting to sink its teeth into us all. Devouring. Devouring blood and bone until we're dust."

She dropped to her knees, unsuccessfully trying to pry stones up from the street. Dried blood coated the beds of her nails. They were cracked and torn to the quick.

"I hear it. It whispers to me and sometimes it's so loud I can hardly think."

I stared down, horrified to note the ground was scarred with several long, thin lines as if she'd been clawing at it for quite some time.

"Claudia, please." I bent to place my hands over hers, but she craned around and hissed like a feral creature, her eyes void of recognition. I jerked away. "What happened?"

"Dust. Dust. We're mirrors in dust. We're skulls without flesh, bones without marrow. Death. Death would be welcome. None are welcome. And you"—her dark gaze shot to mine—"you'll burn and burn, and the moon will have her vengeance, and the sun will swallow us whole and there will be nothing left. Stars. The stars are out, and they're falling like feathers ripped from the mighty raven because he craves their meat and she wishes to feed him until he's gorged, but he will never be satisfied. He is sin and is glad of it."

Black mirrors were used for scrying, and some people also used animal bones, though Nonna cautioned against using items touched by

death. She argued the future should only be viewed by the living, that things rotting deep within the soil had broken down into something else, and moved on from this realm, and therefore were no longer worried about what was to come.

As far as I knew, Claudia only used a handful of gemstones or spell candles.

She rocked back and forth, whispering. Her words were rushed and laced with a frenzied panic. She wasn't speaking exclusively in Italian anymore, and I didn't understand half of what she said. I couldn't help but fear she was repeating messages from creatures I wouldn't want to meet in the flesh. I tried reaching for her again, not wanting to leave her alone in this nightmare.

She struggled to get away, but I wrapped my arms around her, smoothing damp hair from her brow. "Shh. Shh. The stars aren't falling. We're all safe."

"Safe. Safe in chains and locks and black mirrors with no keys." Claudia rocked in my arms. "I hear it, or them. It's hard to tell. They're all talking at once—the bones of the dead, and the dust of the stars, and the devouring moon with its vicious grin. The goddess who is and is not, is vengeance."

A terrible suspicion pooled in my belly. "Did you use human bones?"

"It said I would know. That they'd tell me. The dead shouldn't mind. The dead have no mind, no will. No memory. Our minds were made for forgetting. The locks don't fit the keys. I only used the bones because it said to. Lovely stars were supposed to light the way, lead me to them. I was supposed to help. They won't stop screaming… make them stop screaming!"

"Who's screaming?"

"The damned! They think they burn, but there are worse fates than fire and ash."

It was unnervingly similar to what Wrath had said earlier.

Claudia threw her head back and screamed, raising an army of goose bumps on my body. Lights went on in the monastery dorms. I held her tightly to me, trying to keep her from thrashing. She needed to be still before the brotherhood arrived.

"It's all right. Everything's all right. Breathe."

"Black mirrors. Burning eyes. Death comes bearing friendship. *Inferus sicut superus*. The book needs blood. It craves it. Blood breaks it." She shoved me away, and whipped around. "Hide your heart. Hide it before—" She tapped my chest, shaking her head. Tears streamed down her face. "Too late. They took the ticker, and tucked it away beneath rock and dirt. Death. Bones and dust and screams. Gone. Change is here."

“What change did you see?”

“*Angelus mortis.* He’s coming and going, and is a cunning thief who stole the stars and drank them dry. He will take you. You’re already gone. In the end, you choose. But he’s also chosen. I’ll mourn. I am mourning. Like leaves on the wind.” Claudia plucked what I could only assume were imaginary leaves from the ground, and blew them from her palm. “The angel of death claimed you. Changed you. You are here, but not there, there is where you will be, your life is ended. Same but different. For eternity.”

I knew enough of scrying to know her warnings were not simply rantings, or signs of madness. I imagined this was similar to what happened to old Sofia Santorini when her scrying went badly eighteen years ago. It sounded like my friend was trapped between realms and realities, hearing a hundred different messages at once. I couldn’t imagine how terrified she must be, lost within the prison of her mind with no hope of escape. I hoped this wasn’t a result of the spell I’d asked her to work. If it was…

I gently took Claudia’s hand in mine. “Let’s get you to Nonna.”

“They’re all talking at once. It’s hard to understand. To listen. The same voice speaks above all others, cruel, smooth like silk and sweet like honey. Choose, it says. I wanted a taste. It was poison. I was not meant to know. He’s coming. No, no, no. He’s here, no longer there, but here. He walks among us, hidden in shadow. Like death.”

“Nonna will know what to do to help. We must go to her at once.”

She dug her nails into my arms hard enough to make me wince, and whispered, “Run.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

“**You mustn’t linger;** he’s searching for you.” For a moment, Claudia seemed perfectly lucid. Then her eyes went wide enough to show off the whites, and the screaming began again in earnest. It was awful; bloodcurdling and unrelenting. Like an animal caught in a trap as a predator closed in.

I fought the urge to plug my ears. Or burst into tears.

I took a few quick breaths, and pulled myself together—a spell of cleansing enchantment was what she needed, at least temporarily. But those required rose quartz, salt, water, and alkanet root. All of which were at home and didn’t help us here.

A dormitory door flew open, and a few members of the brotherhood rushed outside. I tossed up a hand to stall them, and they reluctantly paused several feet away. I internally cringed when I saw Brother Carmine emerge from the back of the group. I hadn’t seen him in years.

Long-buried memories from childhood resurfaced. When we were younger, a few years after old Sofia Santorini used dark magic, he would stand on a crate in the market, screaming about the devil. We needed to leave. Immediately. If he saw Claudia like this he’d believe she was possessed.

Fear made monsters of men.

Antonio broke away from the group, his expression filled with suppressed horror the closer he got to where we sat huddled together. He scanned Claudia’s messy hair, torn dress, and the blood splotches. “Was she attacked? What happened?”

I couldn’t very well tell him the truth—that she’d been playing with mystical forces in the holy corridors of the monastery, possibly used the bones of the dead in a scrying ritual for reasons I hadn’t yet uncovered, and had paid a steep price. “I—I’m not sure.”

It was close enough to the truth, at least.

Claudia made a high keening sound. Antonio knelt beside her. She lurched forward and grabbed the front of his nightshirt. “I shouldn’t have looked. But she told me to. We needed to know. For Valentina.

Rats scurry in and out, and there are many in our midst. They helped it. Strange little vermin, dropping secrets like excrement. Now it won't leave. He started it—his hatred and evil invited it in. She told me we needed to be sure. He is the chosen. He is death. He shouldn't be able to leave—those are the rules. But rules are made for breaking. Like bones. He loves to break bones. I think it's the marrow he's after."

"*Who?* Who told you to look?" I asked. Antonio raised his brows and looked me over. Clearly he thought I might be suffering from the same affliction if I entertained anything Claudia said as truth. I didn't care what he thought. I had a growing suspicion I already knew who she meant based on the mention of Valentina, but wanted more proof. "Was it your aunt Carolina?"

"She spun stories like sugar, and they were airy and sweet until they burned, and now we'll all burn because he's here and mad, and the gates… the gates… she said to protect the gates. But he's not chained to them anymore, is he? The poison was sweet, I still taste it. Lingering. Stick, stick, sticking in my throat, choking. He has secrets. He wants to devour. Empty glasses poured full of him. No, no. Empty *glass*. How did he do it? A chalice or vase. Vessels empty until full. He has the book. The heart. He needs the body to steal the soul."

A flicker of movement caught my attention. I glanced up. Several more members of the brotherhood had joined us. They silently stood in a half circle, blocking us from the monastery. Some clutched long wooden rosaries in white-knuckled fists. Others looked primed for violence, their attention fastened on my friend. Claudia needed to get to safety before they tried exorcising a demon from her that didn't exist.

"What madness is this?" Brother Carmine asked, his expression hard. My heart thrummed wildly. "Is she possessed by evil?"

"No, no. She's all right." Antonio waved him off. "Just a little too much to drink."

I didn't think members of the holy order told lies, but I was glad he did. Antonio was still on our side, no matter what his brothers might think. "Will you take her to my house? I think she must have been exposed to… something. She needs rest and tea. Tell Nonna she should give her some of the alkanet root she has."

Antonio chewed on his bottom lip, looking doubtful about the likelihood of that folk remedy working, but didn't argue. He offered his hand to her. "Will you come with me, Claudia? We're going to go for a walk. It'll help clear your head. Fresh air always does."

She turned a troubled gaze on me, and I smiled. "He's right. A walk will make you feel better. And so will some herbal tea and rest. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes. But Domenico isn't." Claudia slipped her hand into

Antonio's, then cringed. "He said he's not ready, and he will not move. Time is slipping like water through his hands. But still he waits. He waits and waits. He wants her to choose. He knows she will. Soon. Then he will take her heart, too. And her soul. He wants to kill again. The ultimate prize."

"Domenico?" I asked, turning to Antonio when my friend retreated back into her own fractured world. "Was he here earlier?"

"I… I think so, but can't remember for certain. He's here most days. You don't think…" He slid his attention to Claudia, who'd begun mumbling in that strange tongue again. Concern filled his expression. "You don't think he hurt her, do you?"

"It's dark. Dark and musty, and death is lurking. It's gotten a taste and craves more." Claudia blinked rapidly, suddenly seeming more like herself. "Is he still here?"

"No," Antonio said, "Domenico's gone."

"But don't worry." I helped her to her feet. "I'll find him." I faced Antonio. "Do you know where he lives?" He shook his head. Of course things wouldn't be easy; they never were. "I'll check their arancini stand just in case they're working late."

"Alone?" Antonio's mouth pressed into a tight line of worry. Brown hair fell across his brow. He looked so young and inexperienced compared to Wrath. "If he did something… maybe we should go together."

I mustered up what I hoped was a reassuring smile. While I'd love to have him with me when I confronted Domenico, there were questions I needed to ask that he couldn't be privy to. And not just because he was human. I wouldn't be able to mention the dark arts, or toss around accusations of cavorting with demon princes in front of a member of the holy brotherhood.

"I'll be all right. I don't believe Domenico did anything sinister," I lied. "He might know if she ingested any strange food or drink. Who knows? Maybe there was some mold, or other toxin present for one of her desiccations. Or maybe she had a bad bottle of wine. Valentina's death is probably to blame if she drank too much. Murder isn't easy to accept."

That seemed to mollify Antonio. It was perfectly logical. And humans loved logic, especially when it explained away the unexplainable. "She did complain of the bay leaves being rotten earlier. I believe she burned them in the preparation room."

"See?" I smiled. "I'm sure that's all it is. She inhaled mold, or something equally bad. This will pass with some fresh air and sleep, you'll see."

With a polite nod good-bye, he escorted Claudia out of the courtyard. I waited until they were safely down the street and far

away from the lingering brotherhood before I left, too. I tried not to think about the searing accusation burning in Brother Carmine's gaze as I hurried away.

Since I still didn't know where Domenico's family lived, and I was fairly confident their arancini stall had long since closed for the night, confronting him would have to wait until morning.

I knew where to find Claudia's aunt Carolina, though. And she and I were going to exchange some words. I understood how grief warped a person into doing things they'd normally never do—I'd prayed to the goddess of death and fury and had summoned a demon—but asking someone else to do that when she could have done it on her own… I hoped to rein my temper in before I saw Carolina.

I stomped off in the direction of her neighborhood, unable to wrap my mind around what she'd convinced her niece to do, and how dangerous it had been. I'd asked Claudia to use a powerful spell to ward our homes because I didn't know how, and because not much could go wrong. What Carolina did was much more dangerous.

I rounded the corner and felt a prickle of energy between my shoulder blades. I kept walking, picking up my pace. The sensation continued, which meant I was being followed. And whoever they were, they were furious. I could think of at least one demon I made that angry on occasion.

Wrath probably returned from his visit with whomever he'd been trying to impress earlier than expected, and wasn't happy I'd escaped my pretty cage. Good. Maybe his evening didn't go as planned, either. I turned and glared into the shadows. I really hated the stupid magical ink that connected us, letting him find me when I didn't wish to be found. I'd assumed when I broke the spell that bound us together, the tattoo would fade.

Apparently some gifts couldn't be returned.

"Stop lurking, it's beneath you. If you've got something to say, say it."

"Bold for a witch." The voice wasn't familiar, and his accent was hard to place—almost English but not. I peered down the street, pulse racing. A few paces away, a dark figure peeled away from the building. I instinctually stepped back. He followed, his movements smooth and quick. "Your blood smells like spiced wine. Give us a taste?"

"Who are you?" I fumbled for my moon-blessed chalk, forgetting this dress was a gift from Wrath and wasn't one from home with secret pockets. "What do you want?"

The man stepped into a shaft of moonlight. He wore a long duster that seemed to be cut from the thickest slice of night. Rings glittered on each of his knuckles. They made good weapons.

My gaze slowly traveled up. Ice-blond hair, eyes that looked like they'd been chipped from a glacier, a cruel slash of a mouth twisted up on one side. Human in appearance until he smiled wider, exposing a set of sharp fangs. *Vampiro.* I stopped moving. Stopped breathing. As a witch, I *really* needed to stop thinking some creatures were mere myths and legends.

"Y-you're…" I snapped my mouth shut, hating the stammer that gave away my emotions. So much for working on keeping them hidden from my enemies. Wrath would knock himself in the head with the dull end of his dagger if he saw me now.

"It's been so long since I drank deeply from one of your kind." His gaze traveled to my neck. He was before me in an instant. "Venom is pleasurable. At least if I choose to grant such a gift. Would you like a present, little witch? Untold ecstasy while I feed on you?"

I swallowed hard. "N-no, thank you."

He circled me, his long jacket blowing on a night breeze. My whole body tensed.

"Very well. Perhaps next time."

I sincerely hoped there would never be a "next time" I encountered a vampire alone in a darkened alleyway. One time was enough to give me nightmares for the remainder of my mortal life. His jacket brushed the back of my calf, and I sucked in a sharp breath. The corners of his lips edged up. He stepped closer. Fear seemed to delight him.

"Apologies. I can see my proposition of pleasure has frightened you."

He sketched a mock bow, but never took his attention from my throat. I thought quickly about the stories from childhood. In the legends Nonna shared with us, vampires weren't known for impulse control. I felt my vein throbbing and willed it to stop, which only made it pulse harder. I didn't want a slight temptation to turn into animalistic need.

"My name is Alexei. Prince Envy requests an audience with you. His highness has much to discuss. But first, let's go on a little stroll, you and I. That should give them enough time." He offered his arm like a perfect gentleman. I didn't move to take it.

"Give who enough time for what? Envy?" I asked, losing patience. "Stop talking in riddles."

The vampire's fangs gleamed in the moonlight. "*Mare e Vitigno.* Such a lovely name. Rolls right off the tongue."

Sea & Vine. I went very still. Blood roared in my ears. Envy knew about our restaurant. He would torture my parents and—I forced myself to calm down. There was no reason to panic anymore. Claudia had shielded our home against demons. It was late, and the restaurant

was closed. Thank the goddess my family would be home by now and were protected. A dark smile touched the corners of my lips. I would very much like to have the demon test the deadly magic.

"Tell Prince Envy I decline his offer. And I dare him to try and enter my home."

"My prince said I ought to mention that spells, like witch bones, are easily broken. If one knows where to apply the correct pressure. Or in this case, who to target."

I went cold. "What are you talking about?"

"Did you think you could fool a prince of Hell, little witch? Do you truly believe Envy hasn't had spies watching your home?" His smile was filled with malice. "Demon shields and wards are tricky, but can be broken. Especially by the witch who cast them."

"That's a lie." I stepped back, shaking my head. Claudia was safe. Antonio had taken her to my house—my stomach flipped. They could have been intercepted or attacked on the way. Fear clawed its way into my heart. "That can't be true. The wards…"

"Are down." He offered his arm again. "Your family should be with the prince by now; the more you struggle, the harder it will be on them. He does not like to be kept waiting. Boredom is a terrible affliction in the Kingdom of the Wicked."

"Envy is—he's at Sea & Vine with my family now?"

Alexei nodded.

I wasn't going to simply take a vampire's word for it. I offered him a hateful grin as I whispered a forbidden truth spell. Alexei wasn't mortal, so I ignored the glimmer of wrongness I felt by invoking a forbidden power.

"Did Envy have Claudia break the ward on my family's home?"

He gritted his teeth as the truth was wrenched from him. "Yes."

"Are they at my family's restaurant now?"

"Yes."

I dropped my sister's amulet as if burned. I recalled the way Envy had forced me to take Wrath's dagger to my heart, ready to gouge it out. Then I imagined him doing the same thing to my family and friends. In fact, he might have already started his games. Our kitchen had cleavers and knives and all sorts of tools that could be used as weapons, or torture devices hanging on the wall. I imagined that was why he'd chosen it as our meeting place.

Without wasting another moment, I ran.

I tripped over my skirts, and the taunting sound of the vampire's laughter followed me down darkened roads. I ignored him. He no longer mattered. Getting to Sea & Vine was my only focus. I charged down narrow alleys and uneven streets, jumped over buckets of waste and shoved through lovers holding hands and strolling under the light

of the moon.

I covered the mile in what felt like moments, and burst through the front doors, panting. I quickly scanned the room, searching for blood and gore and signs of a struggle.

My focus landed on the demon prince.

“I do love punctuality.” Envy shut a pocket watch with an audible snap. “You’re right on schedule, pet. The show is about to begin.”

THIRTY-NINE

"It's truly a shame about your grandma." The Prince of Envy sat at a corner table, his back to the wall, surveying the bounty of food set before him. The room was empty except for the two of us. I couldn't decide if that was comforting, or more terrifying. "All that power, gone."

Maybe I was too late, and my parents and Nonna and Claudia and Antonio were all lying dead in the kitchen. As quickly as the thought appeared, I banished it. He'd said the show was about to begin. I clutched onto the hope I could do something to stop whatever sinister thing he'd planned.

"Where are my family and friends?"

He acted as if I hadn't spoken at all. Envy picked up his wineglass and swirled the liquid, breathing in the scent before taking a careful sip. His suit tonight was a deep forest green. Ferns lined the lapels and cuffs. The hilt of his emerald-studded dagger glinted from a strap he wore over his jacket. "I hear your grandmother might not be able to speak again. Tough fate for a witch. I imagine it's hard to cast spells without a voice. Herbs and gemstones are fine, but those powerful incantations are nothing without words to set them ablaze. Isn't that right?"

So he'd been behind the attack on Nonna, not Greed. I thought about the human messenger and the mysterious hooded figure he'd sold secrets to. Envy was the traitor we'd been looking for. I'd wager all of my magic on it. Wrath had been so convinced Envy would never rise up against them, that he didn't even look into the threat. Which opened up an opportunity for the jealous demon. One Envy couldn't resist taking.

I wanted to scream and scream and scream. I considered it a gift from the goddess that I was able to maintain some semblance of dignity. I lifted my chin. "I *said,* where are my parents?"

"Locked in the kitchen."

"My grandmother?"

"I left her at your home. She's no use to me in her current state."

“And my friends?”

“Safe, for now.”

“What do you want?”

“Sit.” He motioned to the seat across from him. “Dine with me.” When I didn’t jump to obey his command, he leaned forward, his voice edged with menace. “I vow to personally torture your family, your friends, and anyone who ventures into this fine establishment if you reject my civilized offer, pet. Then I’ll have Alexei hunt down those you love and drain them dry. Now be a good girl and take a seat.”

“Or don’t.” Alexei appeared behind me, grinning as I flinched away from him. I hadn’t heard his approach. “I’d like to feast before sunrise.”

I glanced between the demon prince and vampire. I wasn’t sure which of them was the bigger threat. The prince poured a second glass of wine. He’d slicked his chin-length hair back tonight, placing attention on the unusual jewel tone of his eyes, the sharpness of his jaw. “Don’t tell me you’re choosing a bloodbath over a glass of wine and pleasant conversation.”

I glared at him. I might be helpless, but I didn’t have to appear so. “I’ll sit as long as you promise to spare my friends and family, and leave here once we’re finished. And by ‘here’ I mean this city.”

“You’re not in a position to be making demands. But I respect your effort. Now *sit*. Drink.”

With little choice, I joined Envy at the table. He nodded toward the goblet of wine. I picked it up, and pretended to take a sip. I didn’t trust him to not have tampered with it before I arrived. If he was planning to sneak me back to Hell, he’d have to take me by force.

“You’re the one who’s been working against Pride,” I said.

He didn’t deny it. He watched me in an unnervingly close way—like he was seeing through layers of skin and bone, and found the heart of who I was and all I aspired to be.

“I understand why Wrath is intrigued by you.”

Intrigue was probably the last thing Wrath felt toward me. “Did you ask your vampire to deliver me here just to discuss your brother?”

“He loves a good challenge. It’s the war in him; makes him want to conquer and win at any cost.” He took another sip of wine, his attention straying to my neck. “It will be hard for him to give you up when the time comes. But he will. Do not delude yourself into thinking you matter to him. We princes of Hell are selfish creatures. We do not suffer the same range of sentiments as mortals, and those born to this peculiar realm. You are standing between him and something he’s sought for a very long time. In the end, he will choose himself. As we all do.”

I set my goblet down, the contents splashing onto the worn wooden table. “If this is what you came all the way from your wicked kingdom to say, that’s unfortunate. You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know. Nor are you telling me anything I particularly care about.”

I saw the exact moment I walked into the carefully laid trap he’d set for me. He cut into a stuffed sardine with impeccable manners. After he washed down the bite of food with more wine, he gave me a lazy smile, though his gaze was sharp enough to stab.

“If you’ve figured out my brother so well, why don’t you tell me what he’s really after? I’m sure a smart girl like you already knows, and doesn’t need my humble assistance in that matter.”

Envy wanted me to need him. To beg for knowledge out of mortal curiosity. Then he’d exchange it for something he wanted from me. And he must want something very badly if he’d go through this much trouble. I got a sick sense of satisfaction for being a disappointment to the demon. “What do you want, Envy? Why am I really here?”

“The first night we met, I suspected you were in possession of something I need. Do you know what that is?”

I thought back to that first encounter. I’d tucked my amulet inside my bodice right before he’d emerged from the shadows. Back then, I was worried he’d been after my sister’s diary. Knowing what I do now, I bet he could sense the power of the amulet. “You want my *cornicello*.”

“Close. I want both your amulet and your sister’s. And you’re going to give them to me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I have in my possession something you want.”

I shivered in place. I knew what he meant; he had my parents. My friends. Nonna might be home now, but that didn’t mean she was safe. I held very still, waiting for him to deliver the blow. He finished the last bite of food and exhaled, sounding immensely pleased. He pushed his plate back then snapped his fingers.

A demon that had the head of a ram—complete with rounded horns above its ears—and the body of a human dragged my parents out by their collars and tossed them down. Their eyes were cloudy, their movements sluggish. They didn’t seem to be aware of what was going on.

I jumped up from my seat, but Envy shook his head.

“Sit, pet. We’re not through. There’s more.”

With no other option available, I dropped back into my seat.

“Good. You’re finally taking this seriously. I’ve waited long enough. Give me the Horn within the next twenty-four hours, and your loved ones will not be maimed. Tell anyone or fail to meet my

demands, and they will be coming to stay with me in House Envy with the rest of my curiosities. And things will end much worse for you. This, I can promise, is no idle threat. Have I made myself perfectly clear?"

I glanced at my mother and father again. They hadn't moved from where the horned-demon unceremoniously dumped them, and stared blankly at nothing. In a way, it was a blessing from the goddess of mercy that they weren't entirely conscious for this.

My eyes burned with unshed tears. "What did you do to them?"

"You ought to be concerned with what will become of them yet if you don't give me what I'm asking for."

"I don't have the other amulet." I kept my focus on my parents, trying to think of a way out of this. "My half was stolen the night my grandmother was attacked."

"Then I suggest you start looking for it. One half won't do."

"If you attacked my grandmother, don't you already have my amulet?"

"Let me provide a bit of advice: accusations without evidence are worthless." Envy poured another glass of wine. "By this time tomorrow, I expect to be in possession of both amulets. I will move your family and friends to your home tonight. Meet me there once you have the other amulet and we will trade. Your family and friends for the Horn of Hades."

I went to remove my sister's *cornicello* from my neck, but he held up a hand to stall me. "Why not take this half tonight?"

"If I touch it now, it will… alert those I wish to keep in the dark. I don't want to draw any attention until I possess the entire Horn of Hades."

"Wrath didn't care about the Horn before. Why can't I ask for his help?"

Envy gave me an odd look. "Wrath will never be the hero in your story. He's carved from something other. In fact, he might be the biggest liar of us all." I scoffed, which only seemed to delight him. "If you don't believe me, then ask Wrath about the final soul he has to collect. The one that will grant him freedom from the underworld, regardless of the curse."

I stared at the smug demon prince. I'd say it was a lie, but deep down I suspected it wasn't. I knew Wrath had his own agenda, and this felt like the final piece I'd been missing. But a soul? I shook my head. He'd saved me when I'd been attacked by the Viperidae. If this was true, he could have bargained with me then. Or maybe… maybe he hadn't told me because he'd wanted to use it to his advantage when the time was right. I exhaled. I was getting paranoid.

"You're lying."

“Am I? I thought you knew better. Why do you think he, the mighty demon of war, cares about safely escorting a witch to the underworld?”

“Because he wants to break the devil’s curse.” As I said it, I heard the doubt creeping in.

“I have a secret, pet.” Envy leaned across the table, his poisonous gaze alight with triumph. “Once he has collected his final soul, the curse won’t matter to him. He will have full power, and the ability to walk this realm freely without an anchor. He can either choose to stay in the Seven Circles and rule his royal House, or he can roam the earth until the end of days. Choice is powerful. And we princes do love our power.” He offered me a slow, vicious grin. “You didn’t think that deep down he could be redeemed, did you?”

FORTY

A prince of Hell's greatest pleasure is causing discord. Before an attack, his irises turn darker than a starless night with flecks of red, a sign of his wicked bloodlust. Do not engage them in battle; you will never win.

—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire

The tall, arched door clicked shut behind me. It hardly made a sound, but Wrath emerged from the darkness of the abandoned palace, his face half-hidden in shadow. He'd discarded the serpent jacket, and his dark shirt was unbuttoned and rumpled. Much like his hair.

I thought about running my fingers through it, and my heartbeat quickened. I didn't want to believe Envy. Wrath had been there for me, even when he said he wouldn't be. And yet…

"Are you hurt? You look…" his voice trailed off as I slowly walked over to where he stood. He didn't move, hardly seemed to breathe as I backed him up against the wall, his shirt bunched in my grasp. His golden eyes latched on to mine, burning. I wondered if he sensed my emotions. If they somehow affected his, too. I held him captive there, caging his body with my own.

He could break from my grasp at any moment. But he didn't.

I eased my grip from his shirt, and slowly splayed my hands over his chest instead. He looked down into my face, his expression wary but intense. Having all of his attention directed at me was intoxicating.

"I want to trust you," I said quietly, holding his stare. His heart thudded solidly beneath my touch. "Why don't you tell me what you really want? Let me in."

His gaze fell to my mouth before he tore it away a breath later. I didn't think the flash of desire I saw was fake. I knew the emotion it stirred within me wasn't, either.

I'd always imagined he'd dutifully take an enemy to bed if it meant he'd gain something from it. Now I wasn't sure that's how he felt at all. There was a charge steadily building between us. And

Wrath seemed poised to let it detonate. Because he wanted to. Maybe I did, too.

I moved a hand inside his shirt, keeping close contact with his skin. His pounding heart betrayed the response he was desperately trying to hide. My hand inched lower. The heat of him, the solidness… suddenly, I wanted this to be real.

One second I was standing there, and the next my mouth was on his, punishing, hard. It was damnation and salvation wrapped into one. I wanted to kiss him until I stopped being angry and terrified. Until I stopped thinking about my family being held against their will. Until the demonic world melted away, and all I had left was this one moment of pure oblivion.

Wrath was still for a beat before he met my lips with equal hunger. His hands slid down to my hips, anchoring me in place. It wasn't nearly close enough. I pressed myself against him. He was gentle at first, then I swept my tongue into his mouth and he came undone.

He kissed me back hard, then his teeth were against my throat—in the exact spot he'd flicked his tongue over the night he'd used that spell to bring me back from the edge of death. I hadn't been sure it had actually happened, now I knew it had. For one startling moment, I imagined him ripping out my throat. The fear quickly passed and was replaced by pure desire.

I gasped from the unexpected sensation. I swore I felt the strange heat from that first encounter simmering beneath my skin now. I wanted him to devour me.

Or maybe I wished to devour him.

I hated how good he felt. How right. I'd kissed boys before—drunkenly and on dares. Chaste kisses and passionate kisses, but none that were like this. Powerful. Savage. Sweet.

A reckoning awoke in me. The more I gave, the more he returned. We traded kisses like blows. And if this were a fight, I wouldn't know who was winning. I understood why some thought kissing one of the Wicked was addictive. Each time his tongue touched mine, it felt as if the ground beneath me quaked. Like we were a cataclysmic event that shouldn't be.

It only made me kiss him harder, faster. I tugged at his shirt, wanting it off. I wanted nothing between us. Buttons hit the ground as I yanked at the material. I dragged my fingers down the ridges of his hard stomach. His hands on my body felt like magic. It was more intense, more seductive than any spell. Somehow, we were now up against a column. I don't remember moving. Maybe because all I could concentrate on was the way he was currently moving against me, hoisting me up. I wanted to rip off the rest of his clothes and see

what else he could do. Discover what other feelings he could awaken in me. His hand slid down to my calf, then trailed up slowly, pulling my skirts with it. He didn't stop, and I didn't want him to.

I tipped my head back, giving him access to my throat again as he paused with his hand on my thigh. I leaned in to his touch, wanting him so badly I was almost driven to madness. Somehow I kept my hand on his chest, and pulled away from kissing him long enough to ask, "Was Envy lying when he said you need to deliver one more soul to gain your freedom?"

He startled away, but not before I got my answer in the form of a singular, thrashing beat of his heart. Understanding dawned before he shuttered his expression, and moved out from my reach. Anger filled the space around us, burning brighter and more furious than our passion.

"What is this, witch? Have you lowered yourself to kissing someone you hate after all?"

I stared at him, unblinking. It was true. I couldn't manage anything besides a slight shake of my head. My eyes stung with unshed tears. Envy hadn't lied—Wrath *was* after a soul. The realization hit me like a physical blow. I'd felt foolish when I discovered I'd accidentally betrothed us, but this?

I was going to be sick.

Wrath's anger seemed to dissipate when he noticed the look on my face. He stepped forward, hand outstretched, stopping only when I shook my head again. He let his arm drop. "Emilia, I—"

"Don't."

He seemed ready to argue, but listened. Long seconds passed. I concentrated on steadying my breaths, letting my feelings untangle themselves. I was angry with him, but I was furious with myself more. I realized I'd *wanted* to trust Wrath. More than I'd even admitted to myself.

Even though I knew better, I wanted him to be the shining prince of this nightmare. I'd fallen under his spell and while there were times I loathed him, I'd also started to enjoy his company.

He distracted me from the pain of losing my sister, gave me something to focus on. He was someone I could jab and who'd jab right back. And now… it was like Lust reemerged and wrenched every last drop of happiness from me again. Only this time, there was only me to blame. I'd let him in. And I should have known better.

"Emilia."

"I can't.…"

Wrath curled his hand at his side.

"Envy whispers in your ear and every action I've taken is wiped off your imaginary tally. Tell me, Emilia, what has *he* done for you?

Aside from trying to carve out your heart. What honorable thing did he do to deserve your trust? Spill the blood of those you love? Maybe you like threats. Maybe I should make some of my own."

The ground seemed to rumble with the force of his anger.

He'd wanted me to study my enemies closely, and I'd done just that.

"Tell me it's not true, then," I said, surprised when my voice came out hard, and not pleading. "That Envy was lying, that you don't need to collect one more soul to gain your freedom. Tell me part of the reason you accepted this mission wasn't to use a witch for your benefit. Better yet, tell me you haven't considered using *my* soul. Can you do that, or does our summoning bond make it impossible because it's a lie?"

For once, Wrath didn't seem to have an answer. He looked ready to lay waste to the rest of the crumbling palace. I was surprised when he didn't.

"Envy is many things," I said, my voice low. "Despicable. Selfish. Conniving. But he doesn't hide those things. He told me what you were really after. He told me what he wanted, and what he would do if I didn't listen. He's made terrible threats, acted on them, but he never deceived me or pretended to be anything other than what he is."

And there it was.

Despair crashed into me, hard. Wrath *had* lied. Maybe not outright, but he'd lied through omission. Which was still lying. I wanted to strike out at him, to make him hurt the same way I did. Instead, I turned and started walking away.

Nonna tried warning us about the Malvagis' lies. I should have listened.

He stepped into my path, moving almost faster than my senses could detect. "Have my actions not told you the truth? Forget the last several weeks. Saving your life from the Viperidae. The impenetrable palace. The elemental bath. Do you think I need to sleep in a place protected by magic? I, who cannot be killed?"

"I don't have time for this." I marched past him toward the stairs. "I'm going back home to stay with my family. Envy is holding them captive. Something else he said that turned out to be true."

He stormed up after me. "No."

"I don't recall asking for permission, demon."

"Envy will stick a dagger in your back the second he gets what he's after."

"Am I your prisoner now?"

"No, but I'd be happy to toss you in a dungeon, if that's what you'd like."

I ignored him and rummaged through new dresses that had magically appeared in a broken dresser sometime in the last few hours. Wrath had a serious obsession with providing clothing for me.

I found a simple charcoal dress that would be easy to run in and laid it across the bed. I couldn't believe I now had to choose my wardrobe based on if I could easily flee from a demon, vampire, or other nasty assailant.

Wrath crossed his arms and set his feet. If he thought I'd hesitate to change in front of him, he had much to learn of me. I stepped out of my current dress and the silky material pooled at my feet. Wrath watched impassively as I slipped into the new ensemble.

Now that I knew that Envy wanted the Horn of Hades, I *needed* to locate my amulet. Immediately. Before I handed it over, I'd strike a bargain with him. I'd make him vow to lock the gates of Hell before any more demons snuck through them, and then he could go to war with the entire underworld. As long as our world was protected, I didn't care what happened in their realm.

I tied my long hair up with a ribbon, fastened a small belt with a pouch around my waist, and added moon-blessed chalk and dried yarrow to it. It was the best I could do by way of protecting myself. I left the room and headed back down the stairs.

Wrath followed me through the corridor and paused near the door to the gardens. I stuck an arm out and barred him from crossing the threshold.

"Do *not* come after me, I mean it."

"Emilia, please. Don't—"

"I swear on my blood, if you follow me, I will sever our summoning bond and send you straight to Hell."

Wrath pressed his lips together—the only outward indication he was less than pleased, but didn't argue, or make a move to come with me again. Feeling relieved, I slipped out the garden exit, pushed through a tangle of vines and overgrown shrubs, and darted into the night.

FORTY-ONE

Two doors away from my home, I became aware of the near silent footfall behind me. After the night I'd had—with my best friend's scrying from Hell, thirsty vampires, and devious demon kidnappers—I wasn't sure what to expect.

There were any number of nasties out for witch blood. Maybe the Umbra demon was back, or another Aper demon was in pursuit. For some reason, I thought about Envy and Greed teaming up to collect the Horn of Hades before divesting me of my skin, and shivered.

I wasn't at all prepared for Fratello Carmine. His dark robes swished across the stones, like little whispers of warnings to run and hide.

I quickly wedged myself between two buildings next door to my house, heart hammering as the sound of his pursuit grew closer. He kept a steady pace, head swiveling from side to side, as he passed me by. I wasn't sure who he was looking for. Maybe he was trying to find where Antonio had brought Claudia. I should have known he wouldn't let my friend leave without being sure the devil wasn't in her.

I waited a few beats before I peered around the side of the house. He'd stopped near the end of the street and was having a hushed conversation with another member of the brotherhood. Fragments drifted over to where I hid.

"Antonio… night…"

"… unholy."

"… missing."

"Found… signs?"

I leaned against the building and took a few deep breaths. Antonio was missing because a prince of Hell was holding him hostage. And it was all my fault for asking him to walk Claudia home. I needed to fix this before anyone else got hurt. Brother Carmine hardly needed a reason to start a witch hunt. The mere fact that he'd been called back from wherever the church had sent him was a sign they believed the devil was on the prowl.

I slipped out from the shadows and hurried into my house.

There were three demons crammed inside the kitchen with my family. One was the ram-headed demon that Envy still had guarding my parents. The other was nothing more than a dense shadow hovering above Nonna and a slumped and sedated Claudia—the Umbra demon. Antonio wasn't among the group, and my stomach twisted with worry. I wasn't sure how demons felt about humans who devoted themselves to God, but it didn't bode well for my childhood friend. I also didn't see the vampire anywhere. I hoped that didn't mean he was feasting on Antonio.

The final demon in the room was the traitor prince himself, Envy.

"Where's Alexei?" I asked, not wanting any other surprises.

"He's back in the kingdom, watching over House Envy until I return." Envy lounged on Nonna's rocking chair, his boots kicked up onto our island. Dirt splattered the stone top. The very place where my sister used to labor over potions and drinks. Something dark and vicious ignited inside me at the sight. Envy didn't appear concerned. "Unless you have the other amulet, pet, this visit is most unwelcome."

Maybe it was the simmering rage I'd tried smothering after my encounter with Wrath, or the sight of my loved ones huddled on the floor in our own home, or pure recklessness, but I'd had it. I marched over and smacked Envy's boots off our island. "Show a little respect, your highness. This might be how you treat things in your hellhole, but this is our home."

Envy's blade was at my throat before I had time to blink. "You asked Wrath about the soul, didn't you? I imagine you didn't like what he had to say." He pressed the dagger a little harder. I felt a slight prick as it pierced my skin. I held still, not daring to breathe. "Do not take your own wrath out on me, or I will turn this blade loose on your grandmother. There's nothing quite as satisfying as watching a witch bleed. Especially one who—"

"Silentium."

The spell rang through the room as if Envy's words had been cut off with the swish of a knife. Nonna rose up from the ground, a faint purple glow surrounding her. I couldn't believe it. She'd forced the demon prince into silence. She clutched her *cornicello* and began chanting a spell I'd never heard. I stared, unblinking, as her voice grew stronger. I didn't know she'd healed. The demons didn't seem to realize it, either, an error they were about to pay for. Nonna drew an image in the space before her, and a glowing, unearthly *cimaruta* charm appeared there.

I was so stunned by her show of power, I didn't notice the glittering black portal forming behind Envy. My mouth opened in

shock. Holy goddess above…

The purple light surrounding Nonna ended in tips of silver now. Envy, for the first time, looked worried. He took a small step backward, eyes flashing toward his demons, but Nonna yanked a handful of dried fennel from her skirt pocket and whispered an enchantment that locked his feet in place.

A flick of her wrist and black thread spooled into the air before the prince of Hell, then slithered toward his feet like serpents. The other two demons moved toward Envy, only to be driven back by black shadows spun from the spell. I could barely hear over the pounding of my heart when I saw what my grandmother had done. She'd magically sewn his feet to the floor. Now he couldn't speak, or move. His eyes widened enough to show the whites.

Nonna returned to her spell. "A key to lock, a moon to guide."

My attention flew back to the magical image of a rue branch as each of the five stalks began shifting and stretching into different shapes. A key and a full moon formed at the end of two branches. I suddenly knew exactly what Nonna was doing. She caught my eye.

"Now, Emilia!"

I held on to Vittoria's *cornicello* and focused on the glowing *cimaruta,* feeding Nonna's spell with my own power. "A dagger to kill, a snake to die."

Two more images appeared on the glowing charm.

Nonna nodded in approval, and we said the final part of the spell together, our voices ringing as a swirling vortex of wind howled inside the portal.

"Blessed owl go forth and fly."

The final image burst at the end of the *cimaruta.* Now all five charms pulsed with purple light. Nonna walked over to where Envy stood frozen, leaned in, and whispered something that made his eyes widen even more.

Then she planted both hands on his chest and sent him straight to Hell. The two remaining demons dove through the portal after him. Nonna dropped her amulet and slumped against the island. The *cimaruta* faded away. A breath later, the portal closed. Silence blanketed the room. I kind of felt like falling to my knees, or throwing up.

My attention shifted to my parents who were still in that foggy, near-unconscious state. Claudia was also slumped over, her eyes shut as if in sleep. Whatever magic Envy had used on them must need time to wear off. Nonna crossed the tiny kitchen and plopped into her rocking chair. "Grab the wine from the ice box and take a seat, bambina. We have much to discuss and not much time. That spell won't last for long. I have a feeling he'll be back."

I stared at my grandmother. She just drew a glowing *cimaruta* and banished a prince of Hell to the underworld. And instead of looking drained, her eyes were alight. In fact, if I looked closely, I swore little twinkling stars shined in her irises. “What kind of magic was that?”

“The kind that will demand payment. Now get me the wine.” I poured two glasses and handed one to Nonna. She took a deep pull and exhaled. While she sipped from her glass again, I set mine down and pulled my hair back. The spell we used had made me break a sweat. Nonna’s attention snapped to my neck, her color draining. “You’ve been Marked.”

“By Envy’s blade?” I rubbed at the place on my neck where he’d pressed his dagger. “I didn’t think he’d cut me that deeply.”

“No, bambina. You’ve been Marked by a prince of the underworld in a different way. It’s supposedly a high honor among their ruling Houses. Very few are given them.”

She had to be mistaken. Instead of arguing, I headed into our little bathing chamber. I moved my hair to the side, and leaned in. I didn’t notice anything unusual, let alone a special mark.

“See?” Nonna appeared behind me and traced the area. She must have used some spell because suddenly a tiny, shimmering *S* gleamed back at me. I squinted. Or was that a snake?

I stood there, unmoving. It was the place Wrath’s tongue moved across me the night I’d almost died in the Viperidae attack. He’d also traced it again earlier tonight. I tentatively reached up and brushed my fingers across it. Coolness bit into my skin. I frowned. “What does it do?”

Nonna didn’t seem at all pleased. “It allows you to summon the demon who placed it there without the use of an object that belongs to him. As long as the prince of Hell draws breath, nothing will prevent him from answering the summoning.”

“You mean… I can just summon him without his dagger?”

Nonna nodded slowly. She seemed on the verge of a lecture, so I quickly let my hair fall back down. “It’s a dangerous thing, Emilia. Who placed that on you?”

There was no point in lying. “The Prince of Wrath.”

“Are you certain?” she asked. I nodded. Wrath had been the only one who’d touched me. I tried not to think about his lips on my neck earlier tonight. Or how it had made me feel. Nonna just stared for another minute. “I suppose there’s no denying it now.”

“Denying what?”

“The prophecy. Back when I was a young woman, I was entrusted with being one of the keepers of the Horn of Hades.”

I was at a loss for words. I replayed her confession and somehow managed to formulate a few decent questions. “Keepers?” I asked.

“How many are there? And what prophecy?”

“Patience. I’ll get to that, bambina.”

My hand moved to my sister’s amulet. “Did you ever wear them?”

“No, never. Each generation, dating back from when La Prima first handed them off, a witch was chosen to guard them. We were told of an ancient prophecy involving twin witches. When they were born, on the night of a terrible storm, only then could the amulets be worn.”

I took a deep breath. It was a lot to absorb at once. “How do you know Vittoria and I are the subjects? Maybe there are other twins…”

“No other twin witches, both with magic, have been born into this line.”

“Ever?” I asked. Nonna shook her head. “What exactly was the prophecy about?”

Nonna took another long pull on her wine, her expression sad. “The twins would signal the end of the devil’s curse, and would be forced to make great sacrifices to keep the gates of Hell intact. If they choose to do nothing, Hell will reign on earth. The twins are meant to bring balance to both realms. As above, so below.”

My heart thrummed. There was something about that phrase, something buried deep… I’d heard it before, twice. The first time when I was under Lust’s influence. And then when I was recovering afterward with Wrath. “What does that part mean, exactly?”

“No one knows for certain,” Nonna said, her attention shifting to where my parents were now stirring. “It has been a constant argument among the thirteen witch families of Palermo. Some believe it refers to the use of light and dark magic. Few think it means a prince will fall in love with a witch. Others believe it means one twin will rule in Hell to stop this world from being destroyed. And then there are others who think both twins are meant to sacrifice themselves to save both realms. One to heaven, and the other to Hell.”

“How does being Marked fit in with—”

“If the prophecy holds true, there’s not much time left. The gates are breaking.” Nonna suddenly pushed me out of the small room and down the corridor. “You must run, Emilia. Leave us here and go. We’ll wait a day or so and then go into hiding as well. We will find a way to meet again one day. For now, you must leave here and do not draw another prince of Hell’s attention. Do you understand? Do not trust them, any of them. We will find a way to temporarily spell the gates. You concentrate on staying hidden.”

“I can’t—”

“You will. You will because you *must*. Leave here before that demon returns. We will find a way to stop the prophecy, we just need some time.” Nonna cupped my face tenderly, her brown eyes

watering. “Love is the most powerful magic. Above all else, remember that. It will always guide you where you need to go.” She dropped her hands and stepped back. “Now go, bambina. Go be brave. Your heart will conquer darkness. Trust in that.”

FORTY-TWO

I stumbled out of our house and into the street. Dawn painted streaks of red and gold across the sky. I stared up at it, trying to orient myself to my new reality. The world was the same as it had always been, but felt irrevocably changed. A prophecy foretelling disaster… I dragged in another breath. I couldn't believe no one told us about it before. Knowing my very existence might signal the end of Earth's days was kind of a big secret to keep, especially if there wasn't much time left before the gates of Hell crashed open.

I also could not believe Nonna had taken on a prince of Hell, and won. And being Marked by Wrath… Everything was happening much too quickly. I could barely process it all. I glanced over my shoulder at my home, hearing the slight murmur of voices. My parents were fully awake. Thank the goddess. I rushed back up the stairs and halted, hand hovering above the knob. I wanted more than anything to go in and hug my parents, to tell them I loved them, but couldn't. Tears stung my eyes as I hurried away. I didn't want to leave them, but if what Nonna said about the prophecy was true, everyone would be safer without me.

I quickly walked through the streets, trying to figure out a plan. I wondered if my sister had found out about the prophecy. If she had, it explained why she thought accepting the devil's bargain was necessary. Maybe she'd been trying to save me. Between the gates of Hell crumbling and the prophecy, the choices were dwindling on how to stop more chaos from arriving.

I walked past the marketplace, avoiding the stalls of vendors I knew, skirted the edge of the crowds, and ended up on a steep street that faced the sea.

I was thinking a lot about what Nonna said. About love being the most powerful magic. I wasn't sure if that was true in the literal sense, but love for my twin had made me stronger. In the months following Vittoria's murder, I'd left my comfort behind in favor of helping give her peace.

I'd summoned a demon and encountered four princes of Hell. I'd

fought a giant snakelike demon, been chased and almost bitten by another, and had survived it all. I tricked information out of Greed, I learned cunning from Wrath. I didn't know I was a fighter before all this. Now I knew I could and would do anything for the people I loved.

I reached for Vittoria's amulet, wanting to feel connected to her. I wished she could have seen Nonna fighting off a demon prince. As my fingers clasped it, some tiny detail surfaced. I don't know how the connection was made, but suddenly there it was.

Fennel. Nonna had used dried fennel on Envy. And it wasn't the first time I saw fennel in connection with something related to fighting the Wicked. Wrath had pointed out that the image painted on the door to that old fisherman's storage building had a paw holding a stalk of fennel, not wheat like I'd originally thought.

Which meant… My pulse raced. I thought about more stories from our childhood. I knew that symbol—it wasn't in Vittoria's diary and it didn't belong to any demon prince, either. Quite the opposite. I hadn't thought about the legends since the night in the monastery when Antonio mentioned them, but it symbolized an ancient order of shape-shifters who were said to battle evil.

Almost everyone in the Kingdom of Italy had heard stories of the mighty shape-shifters growing up. Talk eventually turned them into myths, but that didn't mean they weren't real and still around. The villagers Antonio had spoken to seemed to think they were very much alive and well and gathering again. Excitement thrummed through me. If an ancient sect of warriors was living in Palermo, maybe it was time to see if they'd like to help rid the city of the demons invading it.

Regardless of anything, I'd felt something supernatural in that room with the fishing gear. And now I was going to find out exactly what I'd sensed.

Inside the abandoned building with the painted shape-shifter symbol, all was eerily still and quiet; like the room itself was waiting, breath held, for its secrets to be discovered. There was something in here I needed to find. I knew it. I *felt* it.

Now I scanned the miscellaneous items carefully, dragging my attention over each floorboard, each corner, and every last item I could see. Fishing nets and tackle still lay in the same heaps. This time, however, I decided to see if my *luccicare* would locate the magical object the way my sister was able to hear them quietly whispering to her.

I held on to Vittoria's *cornicello* and concentrated hard on my

talent, trying to force the lavender aura to manifest. That didn't happen, but something strange did. The more I tried to focus on the *luccicare,* the more attuned I became to sounds. I closed my eyes, listening to a slight humming that called to me. There was something familiar about it I couldn't quite place.

I let go of rational thinking, and gave myself over to my senses completely.

I stepped to my right and the sound faded. I inhaled deeply, recentered my focus, and moved left. The humming came back. I inched toward it, pausing and refocusing each time it started to fade. The closer I got, the louder and steadier it became.

I took a final step forward, then stopped.

I opened my eyes. I'd been guided to the far wall where the fishing hooks were hung up in neat rows. I recalled scanning it the day Wrath and I had ventured inside. I'd been drawn to it then, but hadn't trusted my instincts. I ran my fingers over the hooks. Some were shiny, others dulled by use and rust. I came to the end of the wall and paused. One very ordinary-looking hook seemed to hum the closer I drew to it. I backed up and the sound disappeared.

I focused again and it returned. I blew out a breath, and let go of the questions I had no answers to. I wasn't sure what to do, but reached over to remove the old hook from the wall. As I tugged on it, a secret door behind it clicked open. Holy goddess above. I hadn't expected that.

I glanced sharply over my shoulder, worried there was an invisible spy lurking behind me, waiting to report back to whomever it worked for. I scanned the room slowly, but unless there were multiple Umbra demons in the city, the one hired by Envy was gone.

I shook the chills away and turned back to the secret door. I swore I heard the distant whispers of many voices coming from inside the hidden passage. I thought about Vittoria's diary, about the lines she'd tried to decipher that had been jumbled like Claudia's scrying session.

I followed the hum of voices into a cave, high above the sea…

… I found it there, buried deep within the earth. I managed to understand one line before it descended into chaos.

I thought about the "it" she mentioned. If we'd each been wearing part of the Horn of Hades our whole lives, then that couldn't be the mysterious "it" she'd been referring to. So what, then, had she heard whispering to her high above the sea? What had Vittoria dug up and decided to hide again, somewhere far from the Malvagi?

I peered at the secret door, wondering if I'd be brave enough to see where it led. Whispers called to me, a little louder, a little more insistent. My palms dampened.

Maybe wearing Vittoria's *cornicello* gave me access to her magic.

Which meant, whatever had drawn my sister to that cave above the sea, was now calling to me.

If I truly wanted to find out what happened to Vittoria, I needed to see what was behind that door. With a quick prayer to the goddess, I held her *cornicello* tightly, and stepped into the secret passage.

FORTY-THREE

A crumbling old set of stairs greeted me. I hesitated at the top step, peering down into the darkness below. There were no torches or lights to guide me once I descended into the abyss. Only spiderwebs and the unmistakable urge to run in the opposite direction. The whispers were much louder and more excited in here, and covered up other noises. If someone or something followed me in, I wouldn't know it until they were almost on top of me.

I rubbed my thumb across the smoothness of the *cornicello.* I was a goddess-blessed witch wearing one of the devil's horns. Surely I could find a way to cast a little light. I concentrated hard on my sister's *cornicello,* imagining the times that strange purple light emerged, and the tiniest glow appeared. It wasn't much, but it would be enough to light my path. I exhaled, and began the long trek down.

I kept one hand around my amulet, and the other against the wall, making sure I didn't lose my balance and go tumbling to my death. It took a minute or two, but I finally reached the bottom. I swept my attention around, ensuring I wasn't about to be attacked. I was in a tunnel that reminded me of the location of the Viperidae nest. I fought a shudder. I sincerely hoped I wouldn't run into it again. Keeping those fears from taking root, I forged ahead.

A few meters down, the tunnel forked off in two directions. The path on my left seemed to incline steadily, cutting off my view. The one on my right looked like it went on for a while before twisting to the right. Honestly, neither one seemed like a fun journey, but I wasn't here for a good time. I closed my eyes and listened to the magic leading me. The whispers were louder on the right. And the slight tug in my center pulled me that way. So that was the direction I chose.

I lost track of how much time had passed when I abruptly halted. My sister's amulet had gone from a slight purple glow to a strong pulsating light. I'd never seen either of our amulets act that way before, and immediately became suspicious. I glanced around, searching for the cause and saw a crude cross painted on the wall. I

must be underneath a church. I went to look away, but something caught my attention.

There, buried a little by dirt, was a glint of silver. Whispers excitedly chittered.

Pulse racing, I inched close and bent to brush the dirt away. My missing amulet glowed in welcome. I snatched it up and went to loop it over my neck, then stopped. Nonna said they must never touch. I wasn't sure if that mattered anymore, but didn't want to chance another catastrophe. I took my sister's amulet off and stuck it into my secret skirt pocket. The moment my *cornicello* laid against my skin, my shoulders relaxed. I hadn't realized how much tension I'd been carrying. It might be one of the devil's horns, but it now belonged to me.

I stood up, and looked around. I'd been expecting to find a secret meeting location of the shape-shifters, but there were no doors or offshoots. I was considering my options when I heard a sound that wasn't a result of magical objects whispering. Someone was down here. It might be whoever had painted that symbol on the door, or it might be something much worse.

I considered running, but that wouldn't be wise. Whatever big bad creature was out there would probably love to give chase. I glanced straight ahead, happy to see the turnoff a few short meters away. If I ran, I might be able to lose whatever was following me. I didn't waste another second considering it, I charged toward the next tunnel.

I rounded the corner and hurried into the shadows, drew a quick protection circle, then pressed myself into a damp recess, hidden from view.

A slight displacement of pebbles indicated my stalker hadn't given up. I held my breath, worried the slightest intake or exhalation would give me away. My pursuer paused close enough that I could just make out his features, and I bit back a string of curses.

"Are you completely—"

Wrath's hand shot out and covered my mouth before I finished my sentence. He'd crossed my protection circle without showing any indication it had affected him at all. Which should have been impossible because it was keyed with my power. I was too stunned to do something smart, like bite him.

"Now that you possess the Horn, there are three dozen Umbra demons closing in. Two dozen of which have been following you since you left your house." He removed his hand. "If they attack, I want you to run. Do not look back or linger. Understand?"

"What?" Nearly forty invisible assassins had been trailing me, but that wasn't even the most terrifying part. Imagining that many demons invading this world, and the damage they could do… it was

too much. “How did they get here?”

“I have two guesses. Either the gates are exponentially weakening. Or someone summoned them all.” Wrath pressed us more firmly against the stone, his massive body swallowing up any bit of light from my amulet that might give us away. “If you agree to it, I can *transvenio* us back to the palace. Will you come with me?”

A slight tug of warning stayed my tongue. Which was odd considering I very much wanted him to magic us away from the danger. But it was also highly convenient that I only had *his* word about the invisible mercenaries. Envy had succeeded in one thing; he’d created doubt.

“How does that work, exactly?”

“Put simply, you travel through dimensions with me, and are deposited at a place of my choosing.”

“You said I had to agree to it… does that happen each time?”

“Once you give permission, it is eternal.”

Despite the danger closing in, there was still that nagging feeling I couldn’t ignore. I’d rather take my chances with mercenaries than make an eternal bargain. “And what else?”

He hesitated now. Which worried me. “Essentially it feels like you’re being incinerated while we shift time and space. It doesn’t last more than a second or two.”

I stared at him. Fire and witches mixed as well as demons and angels. It was settled. I’d try my luck with the assassins. “There has to be—”

“Run, Emilia!”

He whipped around, and landed a hard kick into what could only be an Umbra demon. I didn’t see it go flying, but I heard a strange sound. If it was incorporeal, I wasn’t sure how Wrath had made contact with it. He lashed out at another, and another. It was only when they collapsed that I understood the anomaly. Wrath’s demon dagger severed their heads. Maybe holding the weapon allowed him to strike them, too.

As they died, they lost their invisibility. I wanted to run, but couldn’t seem to move. I stared at the pale faces with deep black circles around their sunken eyes, and teeth carved to tiny points that pulled back from rotting black gums. They looked like corpses and smelled much the same.

I couldn’t decide if not knowing their true faces was better or worse.

“Take the horns and leave!” Wrath dodged forward, struck, heads rolled. He was violence made flesh. Watching him attack and maim demon after demon, I imagined he was invincible. He’d strike, parry, kick, and then heads would roll. Body parts went flying. Dark blood

splattered. There was nothing that could stop him.

Envy emerged from the deepest part of the shadows, his eyes glittering like emeralds. “Seize him.”

He snapped his fingers once, and I just made out the shadowy forms of the Umbra demons as they swarmed in like a hive of vicious wasps. Wrath fought, thrashed, and managed to take out a few more, but it was no use. Even something as mighty as the demon of war couldn’t hold back the tide of invisible bodies that kept coming for him. Not unless he unleashed his full magic.

Strangely enough, not one of them so much as breathed in my direction.

Eventually they held Wrath in place. His power rumbled, rolled through the tunnels, but Envy only laughed as rocks rained down. I managed to dodge out of the way as a large piece crashed where I’d been standing a second before.

“Go on. Use all of that might, brother. You’ll bury your witch.” The grumbling deep within the earth ceased. Envy cut a glance my way, smiling. “Don’t worry. It still has nothing to do with his feelings, pet. You are a means to an end. Isn’t that right, brother?”

“If you do this, you’ll be damning yourself, too.” Even held down, surrounded by enemies, Wrath didn’t look cowed. “Is that what you really want?”

“Maybe I like being damned.” Envy flicked imaginary dirt from his lapels. “Maybe you ought to remember what it’s like, dear brother. To have something you covet taken away. Pity you didn’t remember that I, too, am something to be feared. Allow me to remind you.”

If it wasn’t for the sickening wet *thwack* and Wrath’s muffled groan, I might not have known something—aside from being surrounded by invisible mercenary demons—was wrong. I watched in silent horror as Envy’s dagger sank deep into Wrath’s groin, and he dragged it across his body, opening him from hip to hip. Guts spilled out as Wrath hunched over, his eyes wide.

“Go,” he coughed. Blood splattered across his lips.

I stared, unblinking. I think I screamed.

Sounds around me were replaced with a high-pitched keening noise in my head. My face got hot, then cold. Wrath’s entire abdomen was flayed open. One second he was standing, fighting, and then… then… there was so much blood. I fell to my knees and retched.

Envy laughed, the sound bouncing off the walls. “I’ve been wanting to do that for an age, brother. I cannot tell you how good it feels, watching you bleed out.” He glanced over at me, his upper lip curling. “Watch closely, pet. This is how I treat family. Imagine what being my enemy is like. Do not think I’ve forgiven what you and your grandmother did to me.”

He twisted the dagger and Wrath coughed dark-colored blood. I forced myself to watch, to stand. I couldn't fall to pieces yet. The Umbra demons holding on to the demon of war must have let go; Wrath slid to the ground, staring down at the brutality of his injury.

Envy lifted his blade again, but I couldn't bear it.

"Stop!" I choked on a scream as Envy ignored my pleas and stabbed him once more for good measure. He stepped back to survey the damage. Wrath struggled to look in my direction, but couldn't quite make it. He never struggled. I didn't think it was in his nature.

"Please… Emilia. I—" He gasped; the sound raspy and labored. He was dying. Truly dying.

Something stirred in me.

I rushed to his side, hands fumbling, and tried to stop the bleeding. "It's all right. It's going to be all right. You just have to heal yourself."

Once again, I had no spell, no magic to call upon to bind his wound together. I was too rattled to think clearly. I only had my two hands, and the hope that he could heal himself quickly enough. He slowly turned to me, the light leaving his eyes before he met my pleading gaze. This couldn't be happening. I needed him.

"No." Now more than ever, he had to get up and be okay. I shook him a little. He was unnaturally still, pupils fixed. I knew what that meant and couldn't… *he* couldn't be dead. This stupid, arrogant demon was supposed to be immortal. "Get up."

He needed to heal. He just needed some time. I could hold his wound for a few more minutes. That's all he needed. A few minutes. I could do that. I could stay there until he stitched himself together again.

I was still kneeling there, hands full of gore, when his body vanished from this realm.

I stared at the wet blood on my palms. There was so much of it. Too much. No mortal would survive those injuries. Wrath had always healed instantaneously before.

He was hurt, but not dead.

Just like Lust when he'd been struck with Wrath's blade. He *couldn't* be dead. That was the point of immortality. But… I'd seen life leave the demon's eyes. Lust hadn't looked like that. He'd still been breathing when he'd vanished back to Hell. *I* suddenly couldn't breathe. Without him, I…

I held out my hands; they were shaking. I glanced down and watched in a strange, detached manner as my whole body violently trembled. Seeing my sister's mutilated body had been horrible, but watching someone get eviscerated… I rubbed my hands down my skirts, but the blood wouldn't come off. I scrubbed and scrubbed and

—

"Enough of that." Envy wrapped long fingers around my wrist, grinding the bones together. A little more pressure and he'd fracture something. "All of this unpleasantness could have been avoided if you'd have listened. You have no one to blame but yourself."

"W-will… w-will h-he live?"

Envy knelt beside me, and pressed the flat side of his dagger beneath my chin. The blade was still slick with Wrath's blood. "You ought to pray to your goddess he doesn't. Now give me the Horn of Hades and I might consider ending you swiftly."

I dragged my gaze away from the spot of blood where Wrath had fallen. He'd fought for me. He put himself between his brother and me, and paid for it. Anger suddenly swept in, cleared my mind of grief. I glared at Envy, and shoved my hand into my skirt pocket. I quickly looped Vittoria's amulet over my head, finally bringing the Horn of Hades together.

A whiplike crack split the silence as the devil's horns were reunited. Power surged through me. "Get out. Get out before I *make* you."

"You're making a terrible mistake." Envy didn't stagger back or run, but he did obey me. "I will not soon forget your disobedience, pet. And neither should you. It is no small thing to have a prince of Hell for an enemy. Come."

He gathered his invisible assassins and left the dank tunnel. I waited until he was gone before I slumped to the ground. After that show of power, I couldn't bring myself to move. I pulled my knees to my chest. Things had gone spectacularly wrong, and this time I had no idea how to move forward. Wrath was gone. My family was in hiding, and winning against the princes of Hell all by myself seemed more impossible than ever. Seeing Wrath ripped open from hip to hip rattled something in me. I'd thought he was invincible, so what chance did *I* really stand?

I wanted to be brave, and bold, and smart, and vanquish my enemies with cunning. Admitting I had much to learn felt like defeat. I had magic, and the Horn of Hades, but no time to learn darker tricks to even the playing field. Nonna said she'd try to slow the gates of Hell from opening, but who knows if she'd succeed before our time was up.

Being a realist didn't mean I was a defeatist. Maybe things *would* be better if I stopped fighting, and waited to see if the devil wanted to claim me.

Or maybe now that I had his horns I should summon him, make a bargain of my own, and stop further destruction. My attention shifted back to where Wrath had fallen. I had a feeling I knew what he'd do.

And I knew what Vittoria had chosen. But I still wasn't sure what I wanted.

So I sat there, beside the drying blood of my worst enemy, and wept.

FORTY-FOUR

> ***Resurrection spells are part of both the dark arts*** and ***the Forbidden because they go against the natural order. If you attempt to steal back life, Death will take its retribution elsewhere, balancing the scales. As above, so below.***
>
> *—Notes from the di Carlo grimoire*

An hour later I found myself outside the ruined palace. I had nowhere else to go that was safe, and hoped Wrath's magic was still somehow protecting the building. I'd made it into the lower level and had just closed the door when a tiny spike of coolness grazed my neck. I went to ignore it when I recalled what Nonna had said about being Marked by a prince of Hell.

Wrath had given me a way to summon him.

I dashed upstairs, and pulled supplies out of an extra bag I'd packed days before. Black candles, a few animal bones from the restaurant, my own personal grimoire I'd started, and…

Blood and bones! Without Wrath's dagger, I didn't have any gold, which was a main ingredient I needed to summon a demon from House Wrath. I paced around the room and cursed.

For one bloody moment I wished something would just go easily.

I shoved the candles out of the way and sank onto my bed, blinking back tears. I'd been so angry with Wrath after our kiss, so devastated by his omission about what he was truly after, that I'd wanted to hurt him back, but never like this.

Watching someone you know die, even if it's someone you *shouldn't* like, was no small thing. Then Envy's threat, the loss of my family… I didn't know how to proceed from here. I lay down and stared at little lines in the ceiling, thinking they were like the small fissures that had cracked my life into a million little parts. Each line represented another path, another choice, another attempt to right the wrongs committed. I mentally retraced my steps over the last several weeks, trying to divine where I may have taken a wrong turn.

When no wise answers were forthcoming, I gave up and rolled

onto my side. The little dresser beside the bed had a bottle of prosecco and two glasses. A small bowl of chocolate-covered orange slices was also there. I couldn't recall seeing either of them before, but Wrath might have brought in the treats while we were playing scopa.

I didn't know what to make of that, so I banished those thoughts and popped the cork, watching the bubbles fizz and softly crackle as I filled my glass. If the world as I knew it was ending, I deserved a drink before I made a deal with the devil. I brought the glass to my lips and paused. Wrath had said to look in the dresser if I was bored. I wasn't bored, but I *was* intrigued.

I set my glass down and pulled open the top drawer.

A small gold ring hammered into olive branches sat on a bed of crushed velvet.

It was simple but beautiful. I picked it up and slipped it onto my forefinger. It fit perfectly. My heart twisted. I knew exactly why he'd left it for me. During ancient Roman times, an olive branch was given by an enemy as a gesture of peace. A tear slipped down my cheek as I thought back to him calling it a twig of truth. Wrath, likely surmising I didn't have much gold of my own, had given me the final piece I needed to summon him. He'd prepared for everything. Tactical to his very core.

Feeling hopeful for the first time in what felt like ages, I set the candles up in a circle and lit them, placed freshly cut ferns and bones down, then began the summoning. I used a bit of my own blood in offering, and fed the circle a few drops.

"By earth, blood, and bone. I invite thee. Come, enter this realm of man. Join me. Bound in this circle, until I send thee home."

I knelt there, waiting for the telltale smoke of Wrath's arrival. Seconds passed. I kept my hope in check. Last time, seconds after the incantation was done, the first signs of his arrival had occurred. Maybe, since he was greatly injured, he needed a bigger offering. I squeezed a few more droplets of blood into the circle. Nothing happened.

"Come on, demon."

I went over the ritual again. Adjusting the ferns, bones, and candles until they formed a perfect circle. I set my ring inside the containment area, then dripped more blood.

"By earth, blood, and bone. I invite thee. Come, enter this realm of man. Join me. Bound in this circle, until I send thee home."

I left out the Latin again, seeing as the last time it ended in an unplanned betrothal and Wrath said it wasn't necessary. When all remained silent, I tried one final time, and used the same incantation that would bind us together in unholy matrimony if Wrath accepted it.

"By earth, blood, and bone. I invite thee. Come, enter this realm

of man. Join me. Bound in this circle, until I send thee home. *Aevitas ligati in aeternus protego.*"

A stiff breeze blew one of the candles out. I waited, breath held, for the mighty demon of war to rise. Immortal. Furious. Breathtaking. I braced myself for a lecture that was sure to come. Moments came and went, but there was no smoke, or sign I'd summoned anything. I waited and waited. Birds began calling to each other outside; morning wasn't far off. And the spell for Wrath could only be cast at night.

Still, I tried again, hoping this time would do it.

Eventually, the last of my hope was extinguished. Nonna said as long as he lived, Wrath would come. The fact that he didn't appear filled me with dread. I thought back to the very beginning, when I'd prayed to the goddess of death and fury, and couldn't help but wonder if she finally exacted the revenge I no longer wanted against him.

I watched the candles flicker, wishing they'd set the bedding and whole palace on fire. It would only be fitting for the rest of my world to go up in flames. Wrath was really, truly gone. And with him he'd taken the last of my hope.

The Horn of Hades was in my possession, but I wasn't sure how to use it to close the gates of Hell. My family had fled, Antonio was kidnapped by Envy, and my best friend's mind was still trapped between realms. Umbra demons had infiltrated this city, and I had no idea how to get rid of them all.

I blew out the summoning candles one by one until I was left completely in the dark.

FORTY-FIVE

By the time the sun spread its first rays across the sea, I was already dressed for battle. I stood in the mirror and finished braiding half my hair into a coronet, and left the other half down in loose waves. I secured the upper portion with two large diamond-encrusted olive branch clips that—with the exception of the precious stones—matched my new ring. I dabbed my lips with wine-colored stain and swept kohl across my lids.

I stepped back and admired my work; I looked dangerous. My dress was a deep berry with capped sleeves made entirely from gold scales. It was dark enough to hide blood, but wasn't another all-black ensemble. I didn't mind the color—it just felt too much like mourning.

And I was completely through with feeling sad.

Wrath said I had a choice—I could either be a victim or a victor. And, much as I was loath to admit it, he was right. Others would always be out there, trying to knock me down, to tell me who I was or who they thought I should be. People carved words into weapons often, but they only had power if I listened to them instead of trusting in myself.

If my enemies wanted to create doubt in me, I'd believe in my own abilities even more. Even if I had to fake it until it felt real.

I left the Zisa and headed deep into the heart of the city.

I cut a swath around Old Town and headed to Ballarò Market where food stands had been set up around the royal palace. I wasn't surprised to see the Nuccis already had a small gathering of people waiting for their arancini and panelle. Both fried rice balls and fried salted chickpea pancakes were popular street food.

Domenico Senior blotted his brow with a cloth and passed out a bag of food. I was happy to see him away from Greed's gambling den. It made one part of my plan easier.

I watched as his line slowly thinned, and people walked away with their bags of food. My stomach grumbled at the sight and smells, and I decided purchasing something was a good excuse to talk. I needed to eat anyway.

"*Buongiorno,* Signorina di Carlo. What would you like today?"

"Panelle with extra lemon wedges, please."

The elder Nucci fried the flat pancakes to perfection, hit them with some sea salt, then added them to a paper bag with an extra wedge of lemon. I handed my coins over, and drifted to the side where his awning provided a bit of shade. "How is Domenico Junior?"

"He in trouble?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that, so I pulled one of Wrath's favorite tricks and ignored it. "My sister had mentioned him, and I've heard he's been spending a lot of time at the monastery. It must be hard on him, losing someone he cared about."

Domenico Senior's gaze drifted to the person standing behind me before he passed out an order of arancini, and set another few into the fryer basket. "He's all right. He left for Calabria this morning to help his cousin."

I stopped chewing my panelle. Of all times for Domenico Junior to leave home, it was odd that he chose now. I changed tactics. "Have you spent any time in that gambling hall?" I asked, hoping it wasn't too rude. "I need to find it as soon as possible."

He shook his head. "Afraid I can't help you. I heard the guy who runs it left."

Internally I screamed and cursed the goddess of missed opportunities. I was about to leave when I noticed a strange tattoo inked onto his forearm. A pawprint clutching what appeared to be a fennel stalk. My gaze fell to the side of his food cart—the same symbol was painted there. I'd been wrong. I'd never seen it in my sister's diary. I'd seen it the day Wrath and I had tried to get close to investigate the murder of Giulia Santorini. My breath caught as it finally clicked into place. Signore Nucci was a shape-shifter.

I swallowed hard, and slowly dragged my attention up. Domenico Senior noticed me staring at his tattoo, and hastily rolled his sleeve back down despite the heat of the day.

His reaction set off warning bells.

I thought back to my sister's diary. All it had said was Domenico Nucci. There had never been a mention of junior or senior…

"It's you," I said, dropping my bag of panelle. "Vittoria wrote your name in her diary. It's never been Domenico Junior. Did you hurt her? Did she find out what you are?"

"It's not—don't shout those kind of accusations around. Give me a second."

Domenico flipped the stand's sign to CLOSED, and motioned for me to follow him around the corner where there was less foot traffic. I didn't want to leave the crowds, and he seemed to know that. He stopped where we were still surrounded, but couldn't be overheard.

“Your sister passed out drinks at Greed’s gambling den.”

My heart beat wildly. Finally, after all this time, I had another hint about what Vittoria had been up to right before she was killed. “And? Did she know what you are?” He nodded. “Did you ever see her with Greed?”

“Yeah. She came to him one night with an idea. They were working on a plan they both felt comfortable with.”

“How did you get involved in all this?” He didn’t seem inclined to respond, so I pulled the knife I’d hidden in my bodice and let the sun glint off the blade. I’d learned a good many tricks from the demon of war. “One way or another I will get my information, signore. The choice is up to you on how we go about it.”

“All right, all right.” He swallowed hard and glanced around. “You know about the benandanti.”

I nodded. Everyone did. “Shape-shifters, in a sense. Their spirits change into animal forms to astral travel four times a year. They also fight in the Night Battles.”

“Well, that’s what the benandanti are. We’re not them, but they have taken on our symbol so we’re often confused. We can physically shape-shift whenever we please. We’re called Ember Wolves. The benandanti are human, we are not. At least not entirely. Most would say we’re werewolves.”

“Werewolves,” I repeated. “You physically change into a wolf?”

Domenico Senior nodded.

I took a moment to recover. I had never heard of an Ember Wolf, but there were plenty of tales about werewolves. From old stories I’d been told, the wolves stuck with their pack and were loyal only to each other. I didn’t understand how or why he’d associate with the demons.

“Why were you with Greed?”

His gaze dropped to the ground. “We made a bargain.”

A memory of seeing him with stacks of gambling chips crossed my mind. I had a sinking suspicion I knew where this was going. “Did he promise to forgive your debts if you helped him?”

He nodded. “I thought it was a fool’s bargain for him. Then I found out it wasn’t his idea to begin with. He said all he wanted was for the wolves to fight on the side of the devil when the time comes. We haven’t shifted in nearly two decades, so I didn’t think the bargain held value.”

“Why haven’t you shifted?”

He lifted a shoulder. “No one is sure. One day we could, and the next we couldn’t.”

“But that changed recently, didn’t it?” I asked. “Did someone shift forms?”

“When a boy celebrates his twentieth year, he usually changes for the first time.”

And I’d bet anything Domenico had a birthday recently, and was very surprised when he turned into a wolf. “You didn’t tell your son what you were?”

He slowly shook his head. “It had been so long… I didn’t think it would happen. When Dom shifted, I knew we were in trouble. I told him what I’d promised.” He swiped a tear from his cheek. “The disappointment in my son’s eyes was enough to end me. The shame I’ve brought to our legacy, our family. Wolves do not fight for anyone outside of our pack. Now Dom prays at the monastery for me and for himself, hoping everyone will forgive my sins.”

“How did my sister figure out what you are?”

He considered that a moment. “I’m not sure. But she was the one who told Greed to bargain with me. When the deal was struck, she made me promise to keep my word to him.”

“Vittoria set up the bargain between you and Greed?” I asked, heart hammering. “You’re sure that was her idea and not his?”

“Positive,” Signore Nucci said. “It was part of her bigger plan. But she never told me what that was, so I’m afraid I can’t help you there. I was only told to be ready when they called on us.”

I let out a slow breath. Vittoria had found a way to force two enemies to work together. A united front to fight the true enemy. Which was still an unknown. I considered this new information carefully. My sister had believed in Greed. I’d believed in Wrath. And Envy was still the obvious murderer except… he hadn’t bragged about ripping hearts from anyone’s body, and he didn’t have my amulet. Which meant our murderer could still be out there. “Domenico isn’t really on the mainland, is he?”

“No,” Signore Nucci admitted, sniffling. “He’s at the monastery.”

All roads kept leading back to the monastery. And I no longer believed in coincidences.

My sister’s body was found there.

Claudia’s scrying session went horribly wrong there.

Domenico prayed there almost daily, but, according to Claudia, he also spoke with members of the brotherhood. I’d bet anything he may have confided his troubles to the wrong person, especially with how they acted the night I found Claudia.

I bid Signore Nucci good-bye and hurried off to hunt down my next clue.

Before Vittoria was murdered and my world went to Hell, Nonna said there were witch hunters actively seeking prey on the island. I’d ruled them out after I’d summoned Wrath and found three other princes of Hell roaming the earth. But maybe I’d been too hasty.

If someone wanted to kill witches, the holy order was the perfect suspect. Who better to eradicate the world from evil than those ordained by God?

I thought back to the night I'd found Claudia, to Brother Carmine, who'd had a murderous gleam in his eyes. He'd stepped forward, looking hungry for blood. I knew he despised witches, and he hadn't given one of his vitriolic speeches in the marketplace in years. I could only imagine how much he'd love to climb back onto his soapbox and spew more hatred.

His open contempt for magic-users made him a prime suspect for a witch hunter.

Today, one way or another, I'd uncover the secrets the holy brotherhood were keeping.

FORTY-SIX

A group of robed figures was gathered in the courtyard. Tension was as thick as the summer heat among the brotherhood. One of their members was missing, and several young women were dead. I wasn't surprised they were blaming the devil. I hid near the edge of the main building and my gaze swept around the crowd, searching for one member I knew I wouldn't find.

Brother Carmine stood at the center, his hand punching the sky with each impassioned word that left his mouth. Apparently I'd arrived at the apex of his speech.

"Our God is a mighty God, and will not tolerate an infestation of evil," he said. "We must lead by His example in these dark and troubling times. The hour of judgment is upon us. We must stop the devil before he sows the seeds of his wicked ways! Come, let us speak the Good Word to our fellow man. Let us lead them into their Salvation."

"Amen!" they all yelled in unison.

The crowd disbanded toward the city, off to save human souls. I inched around the corner and released a tight breath. Brother Carmine wasn't talking about the devil breaking the curse, but what he said was a little alarming in its accuracy. For once, human souls really were in danger. My suspicion of him deepened. If a mysterious group of witch hunters had formed, it was very, very likely I'd just located them. I was contemplating whether or not I should follow him when I felt the call of magic coming from within the monastery. It was just like the night I'd found Vittoria's body.

If not more powerful.

Maybe I was just better at sensing it now. Or perhaps it had something to do with the full set of horns in my possession. I removed my sister's *cornicello* from where I'd hidden it in my dress and held it up. Even for a non-human witch it seemed sacrilegious to wear the devil's horns into a holy space. But there was no way I'd go inside without protection. I slipped her *cornicello* on along with the one I already wore, feeling a prickle of magic in my veins.

Before I slipped inside, I cast one final look around. All was quiet now. The brotherhood was gone. I crossed the small courtyard and pushed the door open. As I hurried past the mummies in an otherwise empty corridor, I felt… something watching.

I turned in place, and scanned the hallway that used to cause my heart to speed and my hands to shake. This time, when my pulse raced, it wasn't because I was afraid of what I'd find. I *wanted* someone to try and attack me.

"Show yourself."

Unlike in the novels Vittoria loved reading, no villain emerged with a dark chuckle to wax poetic over its master's evil plans. No one emerged at all. I was truly alone. I closed my eyes, grabbed the Horn of Hades, breathed in deeply, and centered myself. When I looked down the seemingly empty corridor of the dead again, I heard faint whispers.

They weren't of this world.

I shut out everything else except the sound of hushed voices. I followed it, traveling deeper into the catacombs. I noted each turn and new hallway I entered, hoping I'd find my way back out again if I had to run. I'd never been this far into the monastery before; I didn't even know there *were* so many labyrinthine corridors that twisted and turned deep, deep into the center of the earth.

As I continued on silently, the hum of voices grew louder. My nerves tingled. Something magical was close. And it was powerful. Part of me wanted to ignore it and run. But too much was at stake. I pressed on, forcing myself to face my fears.

Several minutes later, I stopped in a dank hallway carved of limestone with a lone torch set into a sconce. Light flickered menacingly, like an annoyed cat's tail. I didn't need the sign from the goddess to know something dangerous was close by. I couldn't tell if my stomach twisted in trepidation or anticipation. One way or another, something was about to happen.

A door near the end of the hallway was slightly cracked open in invitation. I took the last few steps and paused beside it. It very well could be a trap, but the whispers had turned frantic now.

I needed to see what was in there. I inched closer, pulse pounding, and pushed the door a bit wider. From the outside, the room looked empty. Looks were often deceiving. Before I entered it, I peered around just to be sure it wasn't a trap. Dust motes spun in circles. All was quiet. Illusions were deceptively easy magic—they often projected what you expected to find.

I should have known better.

FORTY-SEVEN

The moment I crossed the threshold, I knew I'd made a mistake. It felt as if the air was a band that snapped out and locked me in place. I pushed back toward the door, but it was no use. I'd stay in this room until whoever had set the containment spell decided to set me free.

The whispers I'd been hearing turned to full-on chatter. There were so many voices, so many conversations, I could hardly hear my own thoughts.

"It's here."

"She's arrived."

"Open the binding."

"Set her free."

I covered my ears, and searched for any possible escape or means to break the spell. I wanted the noise to stop. *Now.* The glamour abruptly dropped away, as if attuned to my desires. My gaze swept around the true version of the room. The walls were covered in Latin. Lines and lines of it—some in larger script, some smaller—filled every inch of the walls from floor to ceiling. Someone had been very busy. I'd never seen magic used like that before.

The letters softly glowed and pulsated like they were part of a living, breathing entity. I wanted to sink to my knees; a spell that powerful wouldn't be easily broken. But I wouldn't give up just yet. I searched for signs of an ambush. I was alone, except for a book.

My heartbeat slowed. This had to be the "it" Vittoria described in her diary.

When I set my attention on the book, the voices started again, softer, more enticing. I tentatively dropped my hands from my ears. I could hardly breathe. This was the secret my sister died to keep. I knew it deep down in my bones.

A single shaft of light illuminated the old, leather-bound tome lying closed on a pedestal carved from a solid chunk of obsidian. I'd never seen a gemstone that large before, and cautiously moved forward until I stood over the mysterious book. The voices quieted.

A triple moon symbol molded from pewter adorned the cover, but

there was no title to indicate what it contained. It was definitely magical, given how much power emanated from its pages. Soft lavender light surrounded it. It reminded me of the *luccicare* I saw around humans, and was the same shade of purple as my tattoo. I didn't know what it meant, but I had a very good idea of what it was —the first book of spells. Impossibly, Vittoria *had* found La Prima's grimoire.

It was so plain, so simple. And yet, it had cost my sister so much.

I suddenly wanted to burn it.

It was no larger than any other old book, but the power was unlike anything I'd ever felt. The cover was worn in places where it looked like it had been opened and closed a million times.

Like the night I found my sister's body, there was a silent, insistent tug in my center. This time, it begged me to open the book, to glimpse the spells I felt spilling from it. I slowly reached over, and flipped it open to a place that had been marked with a ribbon.

Familiar black paper with gold roots edged around the sides greeted me. I scanned the page—it was a summoning for the morning star. I shut the book and stepped away.

Someone had summoned the devil. Or wanted to.

I took a few steady breaths, mind racing. This was the mysterious grimoire my sister had torn pages from. Somehow her magic led her to the first book of spells, and then she'd removed spells to summon demons. I knew for a fact she hadn't snuck this text into our tiny room, I would have felt it the moment it entered our home and so would Nonna, which meant Vittoria must have stashed it away here. But why would she think it'd be safe within the brotherhood's walls… there was a connection, I just had to *think*.

"At last."

I jumped back as a hooded figure stepped into the room, and reached for my blessed chalk. This had to be the person the messenger had sold his secrets to. I bet it was Brother Carmine. How ironic that a witch hunter set a trap using magic. The figure tugged the cowl back, and I froze, ready for the witch-hating brother to attack. Instead, Antonio moved more quickly than I'd thought possible and knocked the chalk out of my hands like it might grow talons and hurt me. I watched it shatter on the ground, then snapped into reality. Relief flooded my system.

"Antonio! You're alive. I thought…" I dragged my gaze up and noticed the expression on his face. Concern wasn't present. It was hatred. My heart pounded as I took a step back. "W-what happened? Did Envy hurt you?"

"An angel of God would never hurt me." His lips pulled into a smile that was far from the sweet, shy ones I remembered. "Unlike

you."

I could barely breathe as everything fell into place. Envy didn't hurt him, or hold him captive. Quite the contrary. Antonio had willingly delivered Claudia straight into my enemies' hands. He'd known she was a witch and…

"It's you. *You* killed my sister." My voice trembled. "Why?"

"Is it really that hard to believe? That I, a man of God, would wish to rid the world of evil?"

"You sound just like Carmine." I curled my hands into fists, needing to feel the prick of my nails to keep from lashing out. "Murdering innocent women isn't its own act of evil?"

"God's finest angels are fierce warriors, Emilia. Sometimes in order to accomplish the greatest good, we must first become a blade of justice and carve through our enemies. You wouldn't understand. It's not something you'd be capable of doing, *witch*."

What little control I'd managed to hang on to, left me.

"You know *nothing* of what I can do."

"Maybe not. But if you use magic on me now, you'll prove me right." He jerked his chin toward my combined amulets. They were fiercely glowing. "*All* witches are born evil."

My temper and hurt raged around. I stepped forward and unleashed the pent-up wrath I'd been clutching onto since my twin's murder.

"You're wrong. We're not born evil. Some of us become that way. Through hate."

Strands of my hair lifted as if there were suddenly a breeze. A storm was brewing and it wasn't of this world. The glowing words that surrounded us pulsed faster. Magic singed the air, and incantations I didn't know swirled through my mind. Maybe the devil's horns were fueling me, or the first book of spells was feeding me its charms.

Perhaps it was simply my own darkness escaping. I didn't care.

I held the Horn of Hades and whispered a spell so foul, the words burned as they left my lips. I lifted my arm, then slashed down in an arc. Invisible claws cut Antonio's robes to ribbons.

This time I spared his flesh.

Fear entered his eyes. He slowly backed away, hands up. As if that would stop me.

"Frightened?" I stepped toward him. "You should be. I've only just begun."

I lifted my arm and he cringed away. His voice quivered. "M-mercy, Emilia. P-please."

"Now you want mercy?" Pure, white-hot anger burned in my soul. "Tell me, did my sister beg?"

I thought of her chest, the gaping hole where her heart had been. He did that to her. Our friend. I threw my arm back and slashed *his* chest open. An eye for an eye. Justice. He pressed his fingers to his wounds, saw blood, and stumbled away. It was nothing more than a scratch.

Fury propelled me forward. “Did you offer Vittoria mercy when she pleaded for her life? Or Valentina? How many women pleaded with you to spare them? Where was your mercy then?”

He fell to his knees and began praying. I waited. But God didn’t show up. The goddess of death and fury did. I knelt down, eyes blazing, and forced him to look at me. I wanted him to see my sister’s face, too. Tears slipped down his cheeks. I fought the urge to smash his skull against the floor and watch the life leave those hate-filled eyes.

Death would be a kindness. And I wasn’t feeling particularly kind.

“When I finally kill you, you will beg for the sweet release of death, Antonio.” I glanced at my finger, concentrated on an invisible blade pricking it. A tiny ruby of blood beaded up. “I swear on my blood, you will never know true happiness again. Your heart will be cursed to be broken each time you forget the sins you’ve committed. And each time you laugh, I will be there, waiting, to remind you.”

I was about to seal the vow with the drop of blood, when the scent of urine filled the space around us, awakening a memory in me. I’d scared the piss out of Antonio. Just like Wrath had done when he’d beaten information from… I startled back and let my hand fall to my side.

Wrath, a prince of Hell, had shown mercy.

Knowing the sort of power he had, I don’t know how he’d managed restraint. And I wished I could be a little more like him now. But I wasn’t.

“New rules. You will tell me the truth about everything I ask, and only then will I consider sparing your life. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes.” He nodded several times and inhaled deeply. “W-what do y-you want to know?”

“Before you met this ‘angel of death’ something must have prompted this. Tell me what grew so twisted inside you. So foul.”

“I—I’m not…” He shook his head. “A-all right. A week before my mother died, I took her to a woman I thought only used folk magic and prayer to heal. Turned out, she was a witch.” His laugh was hollow. I gave him a flat look and he choked it off. “She caused my mother’s death. I vowed, right then, to make amends to God. I promised if I ever met another witch, I’d send her straight to the dungeons of Hell where she belongs. That’s when my prayers were answered.”

"How?"

"An angel came to me, shortly after, telling me about the devil's curse. He said in order to break it, the devil needed to marry a witch. The angel told me that couldn't happen, or else the devil would be set free. He said he'd provide the names of potential brides, and all I had to do to save us from true evil, was kill witches."

My gaze strayed to the first book of spells. I thought about my sister again. "Did this angel give you my sister's name?"

His gaze dropped to the floor. "Your sister's death was… I didn't want to… I even asked the angel to spare her, but he said leaving one seed of evil would cause more to grow. I fought it for a little while. I even argued that she wasn't a witch, he was mistaken. Then she…" He refused to meet my eyes. "Then she started talking about summoning the devil that night in the monastery, and I couldn't deny the truth. She had to be stopped."

I held back my fury. Vittoria always joked about summoning the devil, or hexing someone, or other silly things she'd say in front of humans. They normally laughed, thinking she was kidding. I'd worried one day someone might start questioning her. I never thought it would be someone close to us. "You betrayed her. Me."

"And you didn't do the same to me?" he asked, his voice turning momentarily sharp before he caught himself. "You cast a spell to make me fall in love with you. You lied to my face every day, hiding the truth of what you are." Despite my earlier show of power, his face contorted with rage. "You belong in Hell with the other cursed and damned souls. You're not even human. You disgust me."

"I have *never* used a spell on you for love."

"Can you honestly say—before tonight—that you've never used magic on me without my consent? Are you an exception to the rule?"

"Of course I haven't, I…" I closed my mouth. I'd used a forbidden truth spell on him when we were children. I'd violated his free will. What I'd done was wrong, but it didn't give him the right to murder women in retribution. "How were you planning on stopping the devil from finding a witch in a different city?"

"By summoning him."

"You, a man of God, doing the work of supposed angels, want to summon the devil?"

"Oh, I don't want to do it, Emilia. But I'll do what has to be done. I want him to watch as I destroy his horns."

My hand went to my amulet. "How do—"

"How did I know you're wearing the actual horns of the devil?" he mocked. "My angel of death. You see, first we'd destroy every living witch. Then, we'd summon the devil and put a blade through him."

"What was this angel's name?"

Antonio lifted a shoulder. “He wouldn’t tell me. But there was something… powerful about him. I knew he wasn’t lying. Only something heaven sent could inspire that much glory.”

Whether Antonio knew it or not, I’d bet my soul he’d been influenced by a prince of Hell. And I think I knew exactly who had orchestrated it all: Envy. The traitor demon. I just needed proof, and then I’d destroy him.

“How do the hearts factor in?”

He gave me an odd look. “Hearts?”

Like he didn’t know. Clearly, his cooperation was ending. Or maybe there were parts of his beastly acts he couldn’t face. I stopped paying attention to Antonio, and started thinking about my next move. I thought about my sister, about her plan to summon the devil. She wanted to bargain with him.

Maybe she knew Envy, or some other prince of Hell had been nudging the hands of fate, and that the only way to stop him was to help Pride break the curse. Which would explain why she wanted the werewolves and Greed to team up. Whatever her reasons, she thought her best course of action was to go to the underworld. Antonio might be the instrument of death, he might have chosen to commit these atrocious acts, but he hadn’t acted alone.

Now I wanted to find out who else had helped kill my sister.

An idea, wild and mad, formed in my head. If Antonio actually managed to summon the devil now, I could use it to my advantage. My sister believed that ruling in Hell was her best choice.

Maybe it was mine, too.

“If you’re going to summon the devil, why wait?”

“*You’re* going to summon him.” Antonio smiled. “And I’m going to kill him when you do.”

I’d like to see him try. I pointed to the half-finished summoning circle and gripped the amulets in my hand. “Light the candles.”

He did as I asked and quickly finished setting up the circle. Instead of using animal bones, he placed flowering wolfsbane between each candle. I stared at the helmet-shaped deep purple and blue petals. It was not at all what I’d think one would use to summon Pride.

When the last piece of wolfsbane was in place, he stepped back and murmured an invitation for me to repeat in Latin. His “angel” had taught him well.

Like the time I summoned Wrath, smoke filled the circle. Lightning whipped around, the atmosphere crackling like we were stuck in the midst of a terrible storm. I expected to see a beautiful man standing before us. I did not expect to see Antonio. His eyes were pools of silvery blue; the only indication he was not the young man

who'd grown up next door.

He glanced around, his movements not quite natural. I held my ground as he looked me over. Pride had taken possession of Antonio's body. Before I could force my expression into a mask of boredom, he stepped closer. My breath hitched. His attention lingered on the diamond-encrusted clips in my hair.

"I have a gift for you, *Stella Strega*."

His voice was beautiful. After what I'd recently learned about good and evil, I don't know why I expected it to be multi-tonal and screeching. "And what will this gift cost me?"

His smile was anything but tender. "Only your soul, of course."

I smiled back at him, my new groom. He had no idea a storm would soon be approaching Hell. "You have my attention, Pride. Impress me."

He ran his gaze over me slowly, and snapped his fingers. A charge of magic filled the air. Something crackled and a gown appeared.

It hung from an invisible source, skirts fluttering. The top was a metal corset covered entirely with thorny vines. Layers of black panels gathered at the hips, and flowed to the ground in frothy midnight waves. Every other layer had tiny smoky gems sewn into it, reminding me of crushed hematite. Glittering black snakes twined together in intricate knots at the waist like a belt.

I'd expect nothing less dramatic for the future queen of Hell.

I was pleased my plan was working, and also terrified. There was no turning back now.

The gown swayed and twirled on its own, as if worn by some invisible being, sweeping closer and closer to where I remained motionless. It brushed against me and rushed around my body, spinning wildly until I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't like how it reminded me of Lust's invisible party. In fact, I hated it.

Everything stopped at once. I glanced down, startled to see my berry-colored dress was gone, and in its place the dark beauty hugged my curves.

I gasped as it squeezed me tighter.

The devil inclined his head. "All hail the new consort."

My heart pounded. "I haven't received a crown yet."

"Oh, but you will." From thin air, he yanked out a dagger with a roaring lion's head and aimed it at his/Antonio's heart. "I've heard of the vengeance you seek. Accept this human sacrifice as a gift from House Pride, your highness."

"No!"

The singular word came out in a strange multi-tonal voice that was at once mine, and completely foreign. The blade hovered against Antonio's skin, but didn't pierce it.

I drew in a shaky breath. “I will meet you, or your representative, in an hour in the cavern where I first summoned Wrath. I have something I need to do before I give my final answer.”

The devil’s focus shifted to mine. “Done.”

“Somnus,” I whispered, putting Antonio’s body in an enchanted sleep. If anyone exacted revenge on him, it would be my hand that dealt his punishment.

Heart hammering, I glanced toward the first book of spells. I’d wanted a few minutes to read over it, and glean any last-minute magic before hiding it from the Wicked, but it was gone.

No matter. I’d make do in other ways. Without a backward glance, I left the chamber wearing the devil’s horns and my sinister new dress, feeling my pulse quicken with each step. Before the night was through, I’d strike a deal with Pride that would hopefully be his realm’s undoing.

I silently vowed to my sister I wouldn’t rest until *all* those responsible for her death met their end.

FORTY-EIGHT

The devil didn't arrive on the back of a fire-breathing steed, or in the midst of a violent storm. In fact, it wasn't the king of demons who came for me at all.

Wrath stepped into the flickering light, looking ice-cold and dangerous. I unconsciously moved toward him, then froze. A low growl swept through the cave. It didn't come from him, but some animal hidden deep within the shadows. A warning from a goddess, no doubt.

Something was very wrong…

I inspected Wrath from a safe distance. There wasn't anything familiar about this demon. This creature left little doubt as to where he ruled. He was the most wicked of the Malvagi.

A traitorous part of me was relieved he was alive. Even though I knew he was immortal, I hadn't fully believed he'd lived through Envy's brutal attack. Another, wiser part of me reeled with denial that *he* was the one who'd come to collect my soul. Betrayal burned inside me.

I don't know why I expected anything else from a despicable prince of Hell.

Angry tears stung my eyes. Nonna had been right about everything. The Wicked were skilled liars. Wrath had certainly fooled me with his act. He made me think he was dead. And that he'd cared. It must have greatly amused him—watching me fall under his spell. A naïve, lonely witch who'd been desperate enough to seek help from her mortal enemy…

And our kiss. I'd thought I'd felt passion, heat. Another illusion cast by my enemy.

I fought a chill as he ran his gaze over me. Where it once burned with intensity, it was now frosted over. It was impossible to discern any of his thoughts. If I was to be his queen, he didn't seem impressed. I desperately wanted to believe *this* was the act, that he wasn't truly this cold and cruel. He said nothing and expressed even less. Envy, Greed, and Lust seemed downright human compared to this alien

before me.

He wore a suit befitting his royal station, hands casually tucked into his pockets. A black crown with ruby-tipped thorns sat upon his head. If turned upside down, it would appear to be dripping blood. His clothing was layered charcoal and obsidian with gold stitching. Silk and velvet. If I didn't look too closely, he appeared more angel than dark prince.

My chin inched higher, giving him a clear view of the amulets around my neck. "Demon."

"Witch."

"I thought you were dead."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

His attention flicked to the containment circle where Antonio floated in a sort of suspended animation. Shadows along the ceiling grew talons. I could almost hear the rough scrape of their nails against stone. Wrath's expression remained blank, but I imagined he didn't expect to find a human magically imprisoned. I didn't bother hiding my taunting smile. Let him see what I could do.

He turned a flat look on me. "Are you ready to sell your soul?"

I stared a moment, taking in this version of him. I hadn't realized how often Wrath gazed upon me with blazing fire until it had been replaced with icy indifference. Whoever stood before me now wasn't the same demon I thought I'd known. I wanted to step away from him, to run.

"Well?" His tone was clipped. There was victory in this demon's gaze. No frustration, or flash of desire, or hard-won respect. I was a means to an end. Another potential witch queen to add to the list of those who'd been slaughtered before ever walking down the aisle. I tried not to think about my own uncertain fate. Even if it boiled down to living out of spite, I vowed to survive no matter who, or what, came for my heart. I had little doubt my life was in jeopardy. Wrath had told me the monsters would come for me, and that I believed. One stood before me now. "Have you decided?"

"Almost."

He appraised me, a small frown forming. Maybe he was disappointed I wasn't cowed by his royal presence and authority. I refused to pretend I understood anything of what he felt, or desired. I wasn't foolish enough to think he'd fallen in love with me, but I could have sworn we'd both shifted from cool animosity to something a bit warmer. I clutched the Horn of Hades as I considered my dwindling options. The slight buzz of magic was comforting—like a hug from my grandmother. If I stayed, the gates of Hell would weaken and open, destroying everything I held dear. I'd already encountered Umbra and Aper demons, the snake-like Viperidae, and four of the terrifying

seven princes of Hell.

I was lucky I'd escaped with my life, and I was harder to kill than most. The human world wasn't equipped to deal with the carnage that hordes of demons would bring if the gates opened. I imagined Nonna wearing another ruby red necklace of blood, her eyes milky and lifeless. I saw visions of my mother and father slaughtered in our restaurant. Every innocent human in our city—lying in rotting heaps, stinking in the blazing sun.

I'd already lost my sister; I wouldn't lose anyone else.

"I agree. Under two conditions."

A new spark lit his gaze. Along with anger, intelligence and cunning gleamed out at me. "Very well. Let's hear your counteroffer."

I was proud of how my voice didn't waver. "From this point forward, no other witch will be hunted, no human attacked. I want every prince of Hell to stay out of this world. And Antonio will be my prisoner to do with as I see fit. Otherwise, I will not join myself with House Pride."

"Spoken like a true princess of Hell." His smile was razor sharp. He seemed smug, like he knew a secret. "Are you certain this is what you want? This is what you choose?" I nodded. Wrath stared a moment too long, like he was trying to incinerate me on the spot. "Done."

A scroll materialized along with a raven's quill, the point more blade than pen. When no pot of ink appeared, I immediately realized why. My heart thudded wildly. If I didn't run now, there would be no undoing this. Some bonds could never be broken.

I carefully read over the parchment.

It was simple enough. Not much in the way of trickery. Which worried me more. Selling a soul shouldn't be so easy. I had a more difficult time haggling with vendors in the marketplace over clothing. Part of me wanted to laugh. But there was little humor to be found in this cavern.

Before I could run screaming, I pricked my finger and signed my soul away in blood, the magic binding me to the devil for eternity. Once I finished, the scroll disappeared in a wisp of smoke. I stared until the scent of sulfur dissipated, fighting a growing wave of panic.

"Anything else?" I asked as a strange tingling sensation fell around me like a cloak. Wrath nodded to my two amulets. Of course. The devil wanted his horns back. I yanked them from my neck and dropped them on the cavern floor, their absence already a strange sort of torture.

They vanished.

I took a deep breath. I no longer needed to worry about hiding from the Malvagi—the Wicked had found me. But that was all right; I'd found them, too. And I hoped they'd rue the day they came for me and mine. Soon I'd be deep within their realm, and would be perfectly positioned to uncover the true players behind the murders, and what they were really after.

Then I would set about destroying them. If they didn't kill me first.

I brushed past Wrath, walked to the lip of the cave, and glanced down. It might be the last time I saw this world, and I wanted to memorize it. An angry swell crashed against the rocks, spraying upward in harsh whispers. I stared out at the ink-colored waves, trying to calm my racing pulse. They looked like silver blades flashing in the moonlight. Nonna would claim it was a sign of treacherous things to come. This time, I couldn't disagree.

The ground suddenly trembled, pebbles scattered, bats flew out of the cave. I braced myself against the unexpected surge of magic, fearing the cavern would collapse.

I spun around, focus darting to Antonio, or where he'd once been. Vittoria's murderer was gone. In his place, Wrath's power whipped around like the tail of a mighty serpent. He smiled, a quick flash of teeth. We were no longer bound together, and his power was overwhelming, infinite. I refused to let my fear show.

The demon's grin vanished and he silently held out a hand. "Will you come with me?"

I knew he was only asking politely because of the demonic etiquette. I didn't want to agree, I didn't want to ever touch him again, but I knew I couldn't find my way into the underworld without his dark magic.

"Yes."

I wrapped my fingers around his before my emotions betrayed me. There was crackling power in our connection. Tiny currents sparked over our skin. Before I could think about it, smoke enveloped us. Searing pain followed. It felt like my entire body was burning. I choked on a scream. Wrath's fingers tightened on mine. There was no earth, no connection to the natural world, nothing tangible except my grip on the prince I now hated more than the rest combined.

The pain lasted only a moment before a new sensation stoked even greater fear. We stood on solid ground again. Which meant…

Goddess above, I could hardly breathe. I wanted to squeeze my eyes shut forever.

Instead, I stared straight ahead, pulled my shoulders back, and waited for the smoke to clear.

I hoped the kingdom of the wicked was ready for a vengeful

queen.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kerri Maniscalco grew up in a semi-haunted house outside New York City, where her fascination with gothic settings began. In her spare time she reads everything she can get her hands on, cooks all kinds of food with her family and friends, and drinks entirely too much tea while discussing life's finer points with her cats. Her first novel, *Stalking Jack the Ripper,* debuted at #1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and *Hunting Prince Dracula*, *Escaping from Houdini,* and *Capturing the Devil* were all *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestsellers. She's always excited to talk about fictional crushes on Instagram @KerriManiscalco. For news and updates check out kerrimaniscalco.com.

Turn the page for a sneak preview at the stunning sequel to *Kingdom of the Wicked*

SOMETIME BEFORE

Once upon a cursed dawn a king strode through his castle, his footsteps thundering down the corridor, sending even the shadows skittering away to avoid notice. He was in a foul mood and it was growing darker the closer he got to *her*. He sensed her vengeance long before he'd entered this wing of the castle. It swarmed like an angry mob outside the entrance to his throne room, but he paid it little mind. The witch was a plague upon this land.

One he'd eradicate at once.

Silver-tipped wings of white flame burst from between his shoulder blades as he flung open the double doors. They crashed against the wall, nearly splitting the wood in half, but the intruder didn't glance up from her indolent position sprawled across the throne. *His* throne.

Refusing to look in his direction, she caressed her leg the way an attentive lover might try with an eager partner. Her gown split up the side, revealing smooth skin from her ankle to her hip. She drew lazy circles on her calf, arching back as her fingers drifted higher. His presence did nothing to dissuade her from running her hands up, along her outer thighs.

"Get out."

The witch's attention flicked to his. "Talking with you hasn't worked. Nor logic and reasoning. Now I have a rather tempting new offer for you." Over the thin material of her gown, she slowly skimmed the peaks of her breasts, her gaze growing heavy as she boldly stared at him. "Take off your pants."

He crossed his arms, his expression forbidding. Not even his maker could bend him to his whims. And she was far from his maker.

"Get out," he repeated. "Leave before I *force* you."

"Try." In one inhumanly graceful movement, she swung herself into a standing position, her long silver dress gleaming like a sword carving through the heavens. Gone was any further attempt at seduction. "Touch me, and I will destroy all you hold dear. Your majesty."

Her tone had turned mocking, as if he wasn't worthy of the title or respect.

He laughed then, the sound as menacing as the dagger now pressed against her slender throat. She wasn't the only one blessed

with immortal speed.

"You seem to be mistaken," he all but growled, "there is nothing I hold dear. I want you out of this realm before nightfall. If you're not gone by then, I'll set my hellhounds loose. When they're finished, whatever's left will be tossed in the Lake of Fire."

He waited to scent her fear. Instead, she jerked forward and slashed her throat across the blade in one brutal motion. Blood spilled over her shimmering gown, splattered across the smooth marble floor, dirtied his cuffs. Jaw clenched, he wiped down the dagger.

Unfazed by her new vicious necklace, she stepped away from him, her smile more wicked than the worst of his brothers. The wound stitched itself together.

"Are you certain about that? There isn't *anything* you yearn for?" When he didn't respond, her annoyance flared. "Maybe the rumors are true, after all. You have no heart in that armored chest of yours." She circled him, her skirts smearing a trail of blood across the once pristine floor. "Perhaps we should carve you open, take a look."

She eyed the unusual silver and white wings of flame at his back, her grin turning feral. The wings were his favorite weapons and he welcomed the fierce, white-hot heat that made his enemies flinch away in terror, or fall to their knees, weeping tears of blood.

With one quick snap of her fingers, they turned the color of ash, then disappeared.

Panic seized him as he tried—and failed—to summon them.

"Here is a trick as nasty as the devil himself."

Her voice was both young and old as she spoke her spell into existence. He swore. Of course. That was why she'd spilled blood; it was an offering to one of her ruthless goddesses.

"From this day forward, a curse will sweep through this land. You will forget all but your hate. Love, kindness, every good thing in your world will cease. One day that will change. When you know true happiness, I vow to take whatever you love, too."

He'd barely heard a word the dark-haired witch said, as he strained to summon his wings to no avail. Whatever she'd done with them, his beloved weapons were well and truly missing.

His vision had nearly gone red with bloodlust, but he reined in his temper through sheer force of will. The witch would be of no use to him dead now, especially if he ever hoped to regain what was stolen.

She clicked her tongue once, as if disappointed he didn't release his inner monster to fight back, and started to turn away. He didn't bother charging after her. When he spoke, his voice was as dark and quiet as the night. "You're wrong."

She paused, tossing a glance over a delicate shoulder. "Oh?"

"The devil may be nasty, but he doesn't perform tricks." His smile

was temptation incarnate. “He bargains.”

For the first time the witch seemed uncertain. She’d thought herself to be the most cunning, lethal one. She’d forgotten whose throne room she stood in, and how he’d clawed himself onto that cursed and wretched thing. He would take immense pleasure in reminding her.

This was the kingdom of the wicked, and *he* ruled them all.

“Care to strike a deal?”

ONE

Hell was not what I expected.

Ignoring the traitorous Prince of Wrath at my side, I took a quiet, shuddering breath as smoke wafted around from the demon magic he'd used to transport us here. To the Seven Circles.

In the brief moments it took us to travel from the cave in Palermo to this realm, I'd concocted various visions of our arrival, each one more terrible than the last. In every nightmare, I'd pictured a cascade of fire and brimstone raining down. Flames burning hot enough to scorch my soul or melt the flesh right off my bones. Instead, I fought a sudden shiver.

Through the lingering smoke and mist I could just make out walls hewn from a strange, opaque gemstone that shot up farther than I could see. They were either deep blue or black, as if the darkest part of the sea had swelled up to an impossible height and had frozen in place.

Chills raced down my spine. I resisted the urge to breathe warmth into my hands or turn to Wrath for comfort. He was not my friend, and he certainly wasn't my protector. He was exactly what his brother Envy had claimed: the worst of the seven demon princes.

A monster among beasts.

I could never allow myself to forget what he was. One of the Wicked. The immortal beings who stole souls for the devil, and the selfish midnight creatures my grandmother warned my twin and me to hide from our whole lives. Now I willingly promised to wed their king, the Prince of Pride, to end a curse. Or so I'd led them to believe.

The metal corset my future husband had given me earlier tonight turned unbearably cold in the frigid air. Layers of my dark, glittering skirts were too light to provide any true protection or warmth, and my slippers were little more than scraps of black silk with thin leather soles.

Ice sluiced through my veins. I couldn't help but think this was yet another wicked scheme designed by my enemy to unsettle me.

Puffs of breath floated like ghosts in front of my face. Haunting, ethereal. Disturbing. Goddess above. I was really *in* Hell. If the demon princes didn't get to me first, Nonna Maria was certainly going to kill me. Especially when my grandmother discovered I'd signed my soul away to Pride. *Blood and bones.* The devil.

An image of the scroll that bound me to House Pride flashed through my mind. I couldn't believe I'd signed the contract in blood. Despite my earlier confidence in my plot to infiltrate this world and avenge my sister's murder, I felt completely unprepared now that I was standing here.

Wherever "here" was, exactly. It didn't appear as if we'd made it inside any of the seven royal demon Houses. I don't know why I thought Wrath would make this journey easy on me.

"Are we waiting for my betrothed to arrive?"

Silence.

I shifted uncomfortably.

Smoke still drifted close enough to obscure my full view, and with my demonic escort refusing to speak, my mind started to taunt me with a wide array of inventive fears. For all I knew, Pride was standing before us, waiting to claim his bride in the flesh.

I listened hard, straining to hear any sound of an approach through the smoke. Of anything. There was nothing aside from the frantic pitter-patter of my heart.

No screams of the eternally tortured and cursed. Absolute, unnerving silence surrounded us. It felt heavy—as if all hope had been abandoned a millennium ago and all that remained was the crushing quiet of despair. It would be so easy to give up, to lie down and let the darkness in. This realm was winter in all its harsh, unforgiving glory.

And we hadn't even passed through the gates yet…

Panic seized me. I wanted to be back in my city—with its sea-kissed air and summery people—so badly, my chest ached. But I'd made my choice, and I'd see it through, no matter what. Vittoria's true murderer was still out there. And I'd walk through the gates of Hell a thousand times over to find him. My location changed, but my ultimate goal did not.

I took a deep breath, my emotions settling with the action.

The smoke finally dissipated, revealing my first unobstructed glimpse of the underworld.

We were alone in a cave, similar to the one we'd left high above the sea in Palermo, the very place I'd set up my bone circle and first summoned Wrath nearly two months before, but also so different my stomach lurched at the alien landscape.

From somewhere above us a few silvery pools of moonlight trickled in. It wasn't much, but offered enough illumination to see the desolate, rock-scattered ground glistening with frost.

Several meters away a towering gate stood tall and menacing, not unlike the silent prince standing beside me. Columns—carved from obsidian and depicting people being tortured and murdered in brutal fashions—bracketed two doors made entirely of skulls. Human.

Animal. Demon. Some horned, others fanged. All disturbing. My focus landed on what I assumed was the handle: an elk skull with an enormous set of frost-coated antlers.

Wrath, the mighty demon of war and betrayer of my soul, shifted. A tiny spark of annoyance had me glancing his way. His penetrating gaze was already trained on me. That same cold look on his face. I wanted to claw out his heart and stomp on it to get some *hint* of an emotion. Anything would be better than the icy indifference he now wore so well.

He'd turned on me the second it suited his needs. He was a selfish creature. Just like Nonna had warned. And I'd been a fool to believe otherwise.

We stared at each other for an extended beat.

Here, in the shadows of the underworld, his dark gold eyes glinted like the ruby-tipped crown on his head. My pulse ticked faster the longer our gazes remained locked in battle. His hold on me tightened slightly, and it was only then that I realized I was clasping his hand in a white-knuckled grip. I dropped it and stepped away.

If he was annoyed or amused or even furious, I wouldn't know. His expression still hadn't shifted; he was as remote as he'd been when he offered that contract with Pride a few minutes ago. If that's the way he wanted things to be between us now, fine. I didn't need or want him. In fact, I'd say he could go straight to Hell, but we'd both accomplished that.

He watched as I reined in my thoughts. I forced myself into a frozen calm I was far from feeling. Knowing how well he could sense emotions, it was probably futile. I looked him over.

Doing my best to emulate the demon prince, I mustered up my haughtiest tone. "The infamous gates of Hell, I presume."

He arched a dark brow as if asking if *that* was the best I could come up with.

Anger replaced lingering fear. At least he was still good for something. "Is the devil too high and mighty to meet his future queen here? Or is he afraid of a dank cave?"

Wrath's answering smile was all sharp edges and wicked delight. "This isn't a cave. It's a void outside the Seven Circles."

He placed a hand on the small of my back and guided me forward. I was so shocked by the pleasant feel of him, the tender intimacy of his action, I didn't step away. Pebbles skittered beneath our feet but didn't make a sound. Aside from our voices, the lack of noise was jarring enough that I almost lost my balance. Wrath steadied me before letting go.

"It's the place stars fear to enter," he whispered near my ear, his warm breath a severe contrast against the frosty air. I shuddered. "But

never the devil. Darkness is seduced by him. As is fear."

He ran bare knuckles down my spine, enticing more goose bumps to rise. My breath hitched. I spun around and knocked his hand away.

"Take me to see Pride. I'm tired of your company."

The ground rumbled below us. "Your pride didn't appear in that bone circle the night you spilled blood and summoned me. It was your wrath. Your fury."

"That may be true, *your highness*, but the scroll I signed said 'House Pride,' didn't it?"

I stepped closer, heart thrashing as I crowded his space. The heat of his body radiated around me like sunshine, warm and enticing. It reminded me of home. The new ache in my chest was acute, consuming. I sharpened my tongue like a blade and aimed straight for his icy heart, hoping to penetrate the wall he'd so expertly erected between us. Wrong or not, I wanted to hurt him the way his deception had gutted me.

"Therefore, I chose the devil, not you. How does that feel? Knowing I'd prefer to bed a monster for eternity rather than subject myself to *you* again, Prince Wrath."

His attention dropped to my lips and lingered. A seductive gleam entered his eyes as I returned the favor. He might not admit it, but he wanted to kiss me. My mouth curved into a vicious grin; finally, he'd lost that cold indifference. Too bad for him I was now forbidden.

He stared a moment longer, then said with lethal quiet, "You choose the devil?"

"Yes."

We stood near enough to share breath now. I refused to back away. And he did, too.

"If that's what you wish, speak it to this realm. As a matter of fact," he yanked his dagger out from inside his suit jacket, "if you're so certain about the devil, swear a blood oath. If pride truly is your sin of choice, I imagine you won't say no."

Challenge burned in his gaze as he handed the blade to me, hilt-first. I snatched his House dagger and pressed the sharp metal to my fingertip. Wrath crossed his arms and gave me a flat look. He didn't think I'd go through with it. Maybe it *was* my cursed pride, but it also felt a little like my temper was raging as I pricked my finger and handed the serpent blade back. I'd already signed Pride's contract; there was no reason to hesitate now. What was done was done.

"I, Emilia Maria di Carlo, freely choose the devil."

A single drop of blood splattered to the ground, sealing the vow. I flicked my attention to Wrath. Something ignited in the depths of his eyes, but he turned away before I could read what it was. He shoved the dagger into his jacket and started making his way toward the

gates, leaving me alone at the edge of nothingness.

I thought about running, but there was nowhere to go.

I glanced around once more and hurried after the demon, falling into step beside him. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying desperately to stop the increasing shivers, which only succeeded in making me shudder more. Wrath had taken his warmth with him, and now the metal corset top bit into my skin with renewed vigor. If we stayed out here much longer, I'd freeze to death. I conjured memories of warmth, peace.

I'd only ever felt this cold once—in northern Italy—and I'd been young and thrilled by the snow then. I'd thought it was romantic; now I saw the truth: it was beautifully dangerous.

Much like my current traveling companion.

My teeth chattered like tiny hammers, the only noise in the void. "How can we hear each other?"

"Because I will it."

Arrogant beast. I released a quivering huff. It was meant to come across as exasperated, but I feared it only gave away how cold I was. A heavy velvet cloak appeared from thin air, draping itself around my shoulders. I don't know where Wrath magicked it from and didn't care.

I pulled it tighter, grateful for its warmth. I opened my mouth to thank the demon but stopped myself with a swift internal shake. Wrath hadn't acted out of kindness or even chivalry. I imagined he did it largely to make sure I didn't die this close to accomplishing his mission.

If I recalled correctly, delivery of my soul to Pride granted him freedom from the underworld. Something he once said he prized above all else.

How exceptionally marvelous for him. His stay was over just as mine was beginning. And all he had to do was betray me to secure his heart's greatest desire.

I supposed I understood that well enough.

Wrath continued toward the gate and didn't look in my direction again. He pressed a hand to the column closest to us and whispered a word in a foreign tongue, too low for me to hear. Gold light pulsed from his palm and flowed into the black gemstone.

A moment later, the gates slowly creaked open. I couldn't see what lay beyond and my mind promptly crafted all sorts of terrible things. The demon prince offered no formal invitation; he prowled toward the opening he'd made without bothering to see if I followed.

I took a deep breath and steeled my nerves. No matter what was waiting for us, I'd do what I must to achieve my goals. I nestled into my cloak and started forward.

Wrath paused on the threshold to the underworld and finally deigned to look at me again. His expression was harsher than his tone, which halted me in my tracks.

"A word of caution."

"We're about to enter Hell," I said sardonically. "The caution speech may be a little late."

He was not amused. "In the Seven Circles there are three rules to abide by. First, don't ever reveal your true fears."

I hadn't planned to. "Why?"

"This world will turn itself inside out to torture you." I opened my mouth, but he held up a hand. "Second, control your desires or they will taunt you with illusions easily confused with reality. You had a taste of what that's like when you met Lust. Each of your desires will be magnified tenfold here, particularly when we enter the Sin Corridor."

"The Sin Corridor." I didn't pose it as a question, but Wrath answered anyway.

"New subjects of the realm are tested to see which royal House their dominant sin aligns best with. You will experience a certain… prodding… of emotions as you pass through it."

"I signed my soul to Pride. Why do I need to see where I'm best suited?"

"Live long enough to find that answer out yourself."

I swallowed my rising discomfort. Nonna always cautioned that bad news came in threes, which meant the worst was yet to come. "The third rule is…"

His attention slid to the finger I'd pricked. "Be cautious when making blood bargains with a prince of Hell. And under no circumstances should you ever make one involving the devil. What's his is his. Only a fool would fight or challenge him."

I ground my teeth together. The true games of deception had clearly begun. His warning vaguely reminded me of a note from our family grimoire, and I wondered how we'd come to hold that knowledge. I tucked those thoughts away, focusing instead on my growing anger.

He was no doubt stoking my emotions with his namesake power. Which enraged me all the more. "Signing my soul away wasn't quite good enough. So you resorted to trickery. At least you're consistent."

"Someday you'll see it as a favor."

Unlikely. I curled my injured hand into a fist. Wrath met my gaze again, and a smile tugged at the corners of his sensuous mouth. He undoubtedly sensed my growing fury.

One day, soon enough, I would make him pay for this.

I gave him a dazzling smile, letting myself imagine how good it

would feel when I finally destroyed him. His expression shuttered and he inclined his head—as if reading my every thought and emotion and silently vowed to do the same. In this hatred we were united.

Holding his intense stare, I nodded back, thankful for his treachery. It was the last time I'd fall for his lies. With any luck, though, it would be the start of him and his wicked brothers falling for mine. I'd need to play my role well, or I'd end up dead like the other witch brides.

I brushed past him and strode through the gates of Hell as if I owned them. "Take me to my new home. I'm ready to greet my dear husband."

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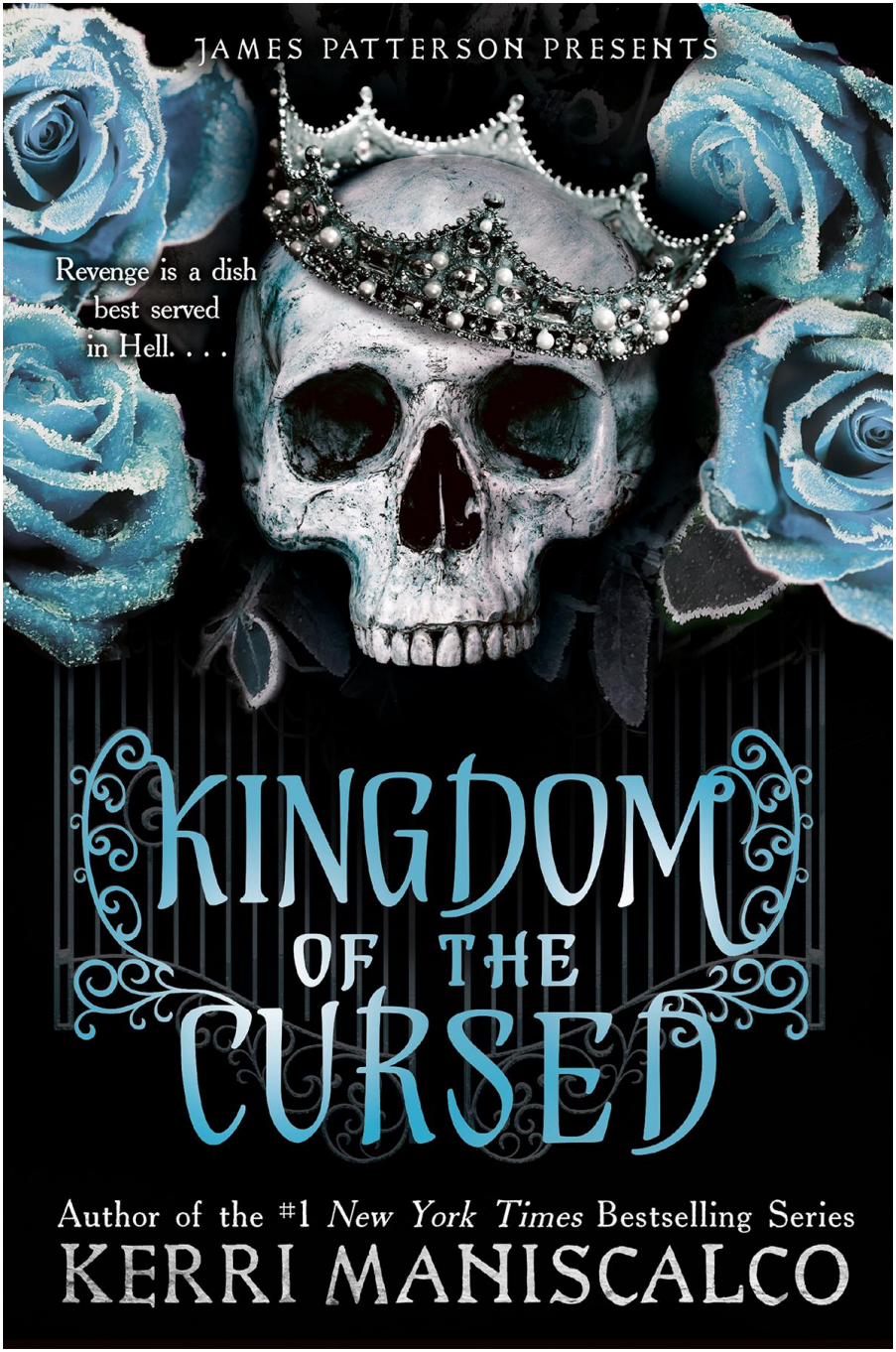
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For you, dear reader. Always.

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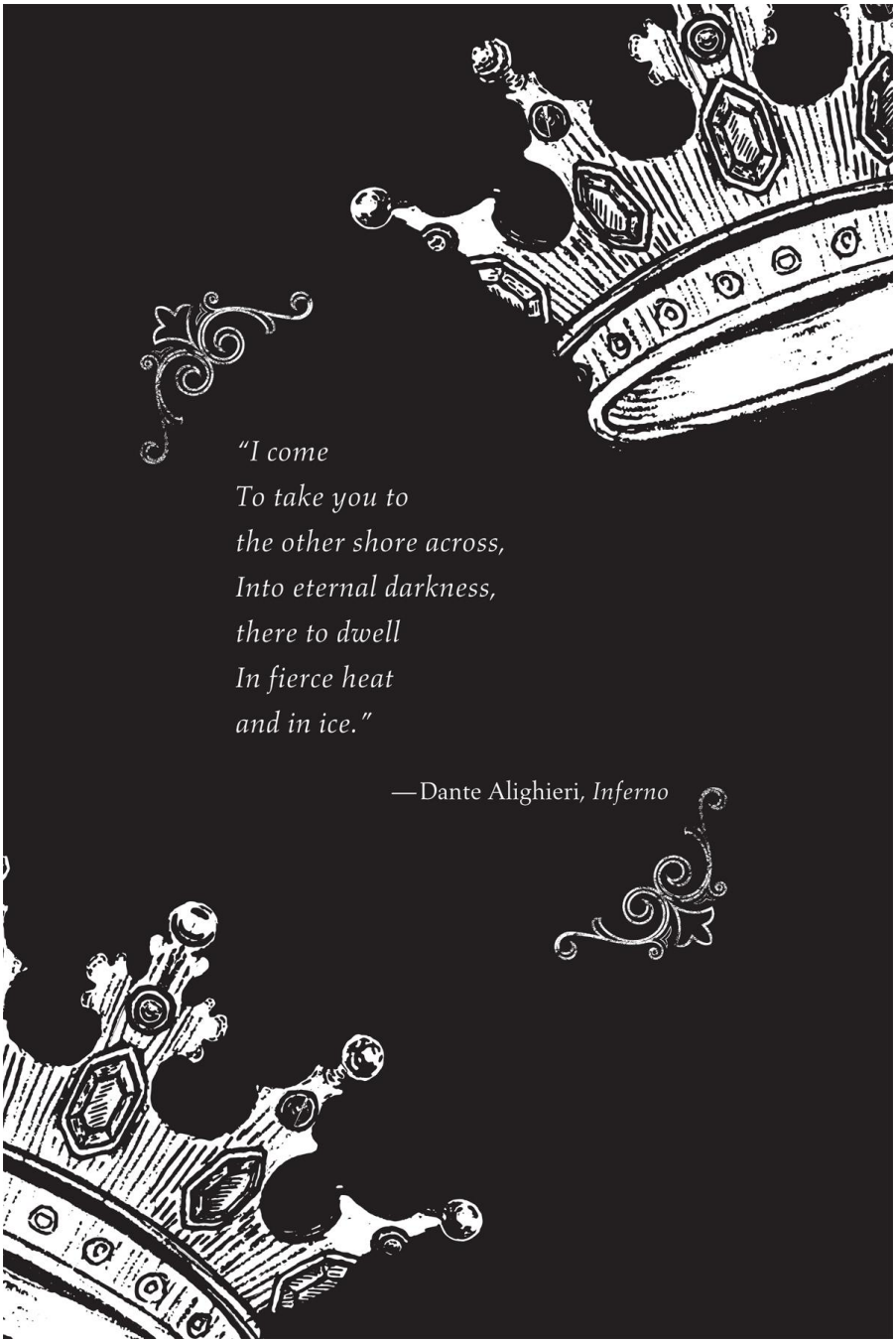

"I come
To take you to
the other shore across,
Into eternal darkness,
there to dwell
In fierce heat
and in ice."

—Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

On an unusually chilly summer eve, amidst a howling storm, twins arrived. It was not the start of an enchanted fairy tale, however. Those who'd been watching, waiting, recognized it for the omen it was. One would forfeit her mortal life, the other would sell her soul. Coven elders argued the hows and whys, but all agreed on one fact: the twins marked the start of dark days. Now, as one turned to fury and eyed the devil's throne, and the other lay heartless, surrounded by death, others whispered of a new prophecy—one that damned both witches and demons alike.

—Notes from the secret di Carlo grimoire

SOMETIME BEFORE

Once upon a cursed dawn, a king strode through his castle, his footsteps thundering down the corridor, sending even the shadows skittering away to avoid notice. He was in a foul mood and it was growing darker the closer he got to *her*. He sensed her vengeance long before he'd entered this wing of the castle. It swarmed like an angry mob outside the entrance to his throne room, but he paid it little mind. The witch was a plague upon this land.

One he'd eradicate at once.

Silver-tipped wings of white flame burst from between his shoulder blades as he flung open the double doors. They crashed against the wall, nearly splitting the wood in half, but the intruder didn't glance up from her indolent position sprawled across the throne. *His* throne.

Refusing to look in his direction, she caressed her leg the way an attentive lover might try with an eager partner. Her gown split up the side, revealing smooth skin from her ankle to her hip. She drew lazy circles on her calf, arching back as her fingers drifted higher. His presence did nothing to dissuade her from running her hands up, along her outer thighs.

"Get out."

The witch's attention flicked to his. "Talking with you hasn't worked. Nor logic and reasoning. Now I have a rather tempting new offer for you." Over the thin material of her gown, she slowly skimmed the peaks of her breasts, her gaze growing heavy as she

boldly stared at him. “Take off your pants.”

He crossed his arms, his expression forbidding. Not even his maker could bend him to his whims. And she was far from his maker.

“Get out,” he repeated. “Leave before I *force* you.”

“Try.” In one inhumanly graceful movement, she swung herself into a standing position, her long silver dress gleaming like a sword carving through the heavens. Gone was any further attempt at seduction. “Touch me, and I will destroy all you hold dear. Your majesty.”

Her tone had turned mocking, as if he wasn’t worthy of the title or respect.

He laughed then, the sound as menacing as the dagger now pressed against her slender throat. She wasn’t the only one blessed with immortal speed.

“You seem to be mistaken,” he all but growled. “There is nothing I hold dear. I want you out of this realm before nightfall. If you’re not gone by then, I’ll set my hellhounds loose. When they’re finished, whatever’s left will be tossed in the Lake of Fire.”

He waited to scent her fear. Instead, she jerked forward and slashed her throat across the blade in one brutal motion. Blood spilled over her shimmering gown, splattered across the smooth marble floor, dirtied his cuffs. Jaw clenched, he wiped down the dagger.

Unfazed by her new vicious necklace, she stepped away from him, her smile more wicked than the worst of his brothers. The wound stitched itself together.

“Are you certain about that? There isn’t *anything* you yearn for?” When he didn’t respond, her annoyance flared. “Maybe the rumors are true, after all. You have no heart in that armored chest of yours.” She circled him, her skirts smearing a trail of blood across the once pristine floor. “Perhaps we should carve you open, take a look.”

She eyed the unusual silver and white wings of flame at his back, her grin turning feral. The wings were his favorite weapons and he welcomed the fierce, white-hot heat that made his enemies flinch away in terror or fall to their knees, weeping tears of blood.

With one quick snap of her fingers, they turned the color of ash, then disappeared.

Panic seized him as he tried—and failed—to summon them.

“Here is a trick as nasty as the devil himself.”

Her voice was both young and old as she spoke her spell into existence. He swore. Of course. That was why she’d spilled blood; it was an offering to one of her ruthless goddesses.

“From this day forward, a curse will sweep through this land. You will forget all but your hate. Love, kindness, every good thing in your world will cease. One day that will change. When you know true

happiness, I vow to take whatever you love, too."

He'd barely heard a word the dark-haired witch said, as he strained to summon his wings to no avail. Whatever she'd done with them, his beloved weapons were well and truly missing.

His vision had nearly gone red with bloodlust, but he reined in his temper through sheer force of will. The witch would be of no use to him dead now, especially if he ever hoped to regain what was stolen.

She clicked her tongue once, as if disappointed he didn't release his inner monster to fight back, and started to turn away. He didn't bother charging after her. When he spoke, his voice was as dark and quiet as the night. "You're wrong."

She paused, tossing a glance over a delicate shoulder. "Oh?"

"The devil may be nasty, but he doesn't perform tricks." His smile was temptation incarnate. "He bargains."

For the first time the witch seemed uncertain. She'd thought herself to be the most cunning, lethal one. She'd forgotten whose throne room she stood in and how he'd clawed himself onto that cursed and wretched thing. He would take immense pleasure in reminding her.

This was the kingdom of the Wicked, and *he* ruled them all.

"Care to strike a deal?"

ONE

Hell was not what I expected.

Ignoring the traitorous Prince of Wrath at my side, I took a quiet, shuddering breath as smoke wafted around from the demon magic he'd used to transport us here. To the Seven Circles.

In the brief moments it took us to travel from the cave in Palermo to this realm, I'd concocted various visions of our arrival, each one more terrible than the last. In every nightmare, I'd pictured a cascade of fire and brimstone raining down. Flames burning hot enough to scorch my soul or melt the flesh right off my bones. Instead, I fought a sudden shiver.

Through the lingering smoke and mist I could just make out walls hewn from a strange, opaque gemstone that shot up farther than I could see. They were either deep blue or black, as if the darkest part of the sea had swelled up to an impossible height and had frozen in place.

Chills raced down my spine. I resisted the urge to breathe warmth into my hands or turn to Wrath for comfort. He was not my friend, and he certainly wasn't my protector. He was exactly what his brother Envy had claimed: the worst of the seven demon princes.

A monster among beasts.

I could never allow myself to forget what he was. One of the Wicked. The immortal beings who stole souls for the devil, and the selfish midnight creatures my grandmother warned my twin and me to hide from our whole lives. Now I willingly promised to wed their

king, the Prince of Pride, to end a curse. Or so I'd led them to believe.

The metal corset my future husband had given me earlier tonight turned unbearably cold in the frigid air. Layers of my dark, glittering skirts were too light to provide any true protection or warmth, and my slippers were little more than scraps of black silk with thin leather soles.

Ice sluiced through my veins. I couldn't help but think this was yet another wicked scheme designed by my enemy to unsettle me.

Puffs of breath floated like ghosts in front of my face. Haunting, ethereal. Disturbing. Goddess above. I was really *in* Hell. If the demon princes didn't get to me first, Nonna Maria was certainly going to kill me. Especially when my grandmother discovered I'd signed my soul away to Pride. *Blood and bones.* The devil.

An image of the scroll that bound me to House Pride flashed through my mind. I couldn't believe I'd signed the contract in blood. Despite my earlier confidence in my plot to infiltrate this world and avenge my sister's murder, I felt completely unprepared now that I was standing here.

Wherever "here" was, exactly. It didn't appear as if we'd made it inside any of the seven royal demon Houses. I don't know why I thought Wrath would make this journey easy on me.

"Are we waiting for my betrothed to arrive?"

Silence.

I shifted uncomfortably.

Smoke still drifted close enough to obscure my full view, and with my demonic escort refusing to speak, my mind started to taunt me with a wide array of inventive fears. For all I knew, Pride was standing before us, waiting to claim his bride in the flesh.

I listened hard, straining to hear any sound of an approach through the smoke. Of anything. There was nothing aside from the frantic pitter-patter of my heart.

No screams of the eternally tortured and cursed. Absolute, unnerving silence surrounded us. It felt heavy—as if all hope had been abandoned a millennium ago and all that remained was the crushing quiet of despair. It would be so easy to give up, to lie down and let the darkness in. This realm was winter in all its harsh, unforgiving glory.

And we hadn't even passed through the gates yet…

Panic seized me. I wanted to be back in my city—with its sea-kissed air and summery people—so badly, my chest ached. But I'd made my choice, and I'd see it through, no matter what. Vittoria's true murderer was still out there. And I'd walk through the gates of Hell a thousand times over to find him. My location changed, but my ultimate goal did not.

I took a deep breath, my emotions settling with the action.

The smoke finally dissipated, revealing my first unobstructed glimpse of the underworld.

We were alone in a cave, similar to the one we'd left high above the sea in Palermo, the very place I'd set up my bone circle and first summoned Wrath nearly two months before, but also so different my stomach lurched at the alien landscape.

From somewhere above us a few silvery pools of moonlight trickled in. It wasn't much but offered enough illumination to see the desolate, rock-scattered ground glistening with frost.

Several meters away a towering gate stood tall and menacing, not unlike the silent prince standing beside me. Columns—carved from obsidian and depicting people being tortured and murdered in brutal fashions—bracketed two doors made entirely of skulls. Human. Animal. Demon. Some horned, others fanged. All disturbing. My focus landed on what I assumed was the handle: an elk skull with an enormous set of frost-coated antlers.

Wrath, the mighty demon of war and betrayer of my soul, shifted. A tiny spark of annoyance had me glancing his way. His penetrating gaze was already trained on me. That same cold look on his face. I wanted to claw out his heart and stomp on it to get some *hint* of an emotion. Anything would be better than the icy indifference he now wore so well.

He'd turned on me the second it suited his needs. He was a selfish creature. Just like Nonna had warned. And I'd been a fool to believe otherwise.

We stared at each other for an extended beat.

Here, in the shadows of the underworld, his dark gold eyes glinted like the ruby-tipped crown on his head. My pulse ticked faster the longer our gazes remained locked in battle. His hold on me tightened slightly, and it was only then that I realized I was clasping his hand in a white-knuckled grip. I dropped it and stepped away.

If he was annoyed or amused or even furious, I wouldn't know. His expression still hadn't changed; he was as remote as he'd been when he offered that contract with Pride a few minutes ago. If that's the way he wanted things to be between us now, fine. I didn't need or want him. In fact, I'd say he could go straight to Hell, but we'd both accomplished that.

He watched as I reined in my thoughts. I forced myself into a frozen calm I was far from feeling. Knowing how well he could sense emotions, it was probably futile. I looked him over.

Doing my best to emulate the demon prince, I mustered up my haughtiest tone. "The infamous gates of Hell, I presume."

He arched a dark brow as if asking if *that* was the best I could come up with.

Anger replaced lingering fear. At least he was still good for something. “Is the devil too high and mighty to meet his future queen here? Or is he afraid of a dank cave?”

Wrath’s answering smile was all sharp edges and wicked delight. “This isn’t a cave. It’s a void outside the Seven Circles.”

He placed a hand on the small of my back and guided me forward. I was so shocked by the pleasant feel of him, the tender intimacy of his action, I didn’t step away. Pebbles skittered beneath our feet but didn’t make a sound. Aside from our voices, the lack of noise was jarring enough that I almost lost my balance. Wrath steadied me before letting go.

“It’s the place stars fear to enter,” he whispered near my ear, his warm breath a severe contrast against the frosty air. I shuddered. “But *never* the devil. Darkness is seduced by him. As is fear.”

He ran bare knuckles down my spine, enticing more goose bumps to rise. My breath hitched. I spun around and knocked his hand away.

“Take me to see Pride. I’m tired of your company.”

The ground rumbled below us. “Your pride didn’t appear in that bone circle the night you spilled blood and summoned me. It was your wrath. Your fury.”

“That may be true, *your highness*, but the scroll I signed said ‘House Pride,’ didn’t it?”

I stepped closer, heart thrashing as I crowded his space. The heat of his body radiated around me like sunshine, warm and enticing. It reminded me of home. The new ache in my chest was acute, consuming. I sharpened my tongue like a blade and aimed straight for his icy heart, hoping to penetrate the wall he’d so expertly erected between us. Wrong or not, I wanted to hurt him the way his deception had gutted me.

“Therefore, I chose the devil, not you. How does that feel? Knowing I’d prefer to bed a monster for eternity rather than subject myself to *you* again, Prince Wrath.”

His attention dropped to my lips and lingered. A seductive gleam entered his eyes as I returned the favor. He might not admit it, but he wanted to kiss me. My mouth curved into a vicious grin; finally, he’d lost that cold indifference. Too bad for him I was now forbidden.

He stared a moment longer, then said with lethal quiet, “You choose the devil?”

“Yes.”

We stood near enough to share breath now. I refused to back away. And he did, too.

“If that’s what you wish, speak it to this realm. As a matter of fact”—he yanked his dagger out from inside his suit jacket—“if you’re so certain about the devil, swear a blood oath. If pride truly is your sin

of choice, I imagine you won't say no."

Challenge burned in his gaze as he handed the blade to me, hilt-first. I snatched his House dagger and pressed the sharp metal to my fingertip. Wrath crossed his arms and gave me a flat look. He didn't think I'd go through with it. Maybe it *was* my cursed pride, but it also felt a little like my temper was raging as I pricked my finger and handed the serpent blade back. I'd already signed Pride's contract; there was no reason to hesitate now. What was done was done.

"I, Emilia Maria di Carlo, freely choose the devil."

A single drop of blood splattered to the ground, sealing the vow. I flicked my attention to Wrath. Something ignited in the depths of his eyes, but he turned away before I could read what it was. He shoved the dagger into his jacket and started making his way toward the gates, leaving me alone at the edge of nothingness.

I thought about running, but there was nowhere to go.

I glanced around once more and hurried after the demon, falling into step beside him. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying desperately to stop the increasing shivers, which only succeeded in making me shudder more. Wrath had taken his warmth with him, and now the metal corset top bit into my skin with renewed vigor. If we stayed out here much longer, I'd freeze to death. I conjured memories of warmth, peace.

I'd only ever felt this cold once—in northern Italy—and I'd been young and thrilled by the snow then. I'd thought it was romantic; now I saw the truth: it was beautifully dangerous.

Much like my current traveling companion.

My teeth chattered like tiny hammers, the only noise in the void. "How can we hear each other?"

"Because I will it."

Arrogant beast. I released a quivering huff. It was meant to come across as exasperated, but I feared it only gave away how cold I was. A heavy velvet cloak appeared from thin air, draping itself around my shoulders. I don't know where Wrath magicked it from and didn't care.

I pulled it tighter, grateful for its warmth. I opened my mouth to thank the demon but stopped myself with a swift internal shake. Wrath hadn't acted out of kindness or even chivalry. I imagined he did it largely to make sure I didn't die this close to accomplishing his mission.

If I recalled correctly, delivery of my soul to Pride granted him freedom from the underworld. Something he once said he prized above all else.

How exceptionally marvelous for him. His stay was over just as mine was beginning. And all he had to do was betray me to secure his

heart's greatest desire.

I supposed I understood that well enough.

Wrath continued toward the gate and didn't look in my direction again. He pressed a hand to the column closest to us and whispered a word in a foreign tongue, too low for me to hear. Gold light pulsed from his palm and flowed into the black gemstone.

A moment later, the gates slowly creaked open. I couldn't see what lay beyond and my mind promptly crafted all sorts of terrible things. The demon prince offered no formal invitation; he prowled toward the opening he'd made without bothering to see if I followed.

I took a deep breath and steeled my nerves. No matter what was waiting for us, I'd do what I must to achieve my goals. I nestled into my cloak and started forward.

Wrath paused on the threshold to the underworld and finally deigned to look at me again. His expression was harsher than his tone, which halted me in my tracks.

"A word of caution."

"We're about to enter Hell," I said sardonically. "The caution speech may be a little late."

He was not amused. "In the Seven Circles there are three rules to abide by. First, don't ever reveal your true fears."

I hadn't planned to. "Why?"

"This world will turn itself inside out to torture you." I opened my mouth, but he held up a hand. "Second, control your desires or they will taunt you with illusions easily confused with reality. You had a taste of what that's like when you met Lust. Each of your desires will be magnified tenfold here, particularly when we enter the Sin Corridor."

"The Sin Corridor." I didn't pose it as a question, but Wrath answered anyway.

"New subjects of the realm are tested to see which royal House their dominant sin aligns best with. You will experience a certain… prodding… of emotions as you pass through it."

"I signed my soul to Pride. Why do I need to see where I'm best suited?"

"Live long enough to find that answer out yourself."

I swallowed my rising discomfort. Nonna always cautioned that bad news came in threes, which meant the worst was yet to come. "The third rule is…"

His attention slid to the finger I'd pricked. "Be cautious when making blood bargains with a prince of Hell. And under no circumstances should you ever make one involving the devil. What's his is his. Only a fool would fight or challenge him."

I ground my teeth together. The true games of deception had

clearly begun. His warning vaguely reminded me of a note from our family grimoire, and I wondered how we'd come to hold that knowledge. I tucked those thoughts away, focusing instead on my growing anger.

He was no doubt stoking my emotions with his namesake power. Which enraged me all the more. "Signing my soul away wasn't quite good enough. So you resorted to trickery. At least you're consistent."

"Someday you'll see it as a favor."

Unlikely. I curled my injured hand into a fist. Wrath met my gaze again, and a smile tugged at the corners of his sensuous mouth. He undoubtedly sensed my growing fury.

One day, soon enough, I would make him pay for this.

I gave him a dazzling smile, letting myself imagine how good it would feel when I finally destroyed him. His expression shuttered and he inclined his head—as if reading my every thought and emotion and silently vowed to do the same. In this hatred we were united.

Holding his intense stare, I nodded back, thankful for his treachery. It was the last time I'd fall for his lies. With any luck, though, it would be the start of him and his wicked brothers falling for mine. I'd need to play my role well, or I'd end up dead like the other witch brides.

I brushed past him and strode through the gates of Hell as if I owned them. "Take me to my new home. I'm ready to greet my dear husband."

TWO

From the darkness of the cave we exited onto a gleaming mountaintop tundra.

I blinked away the sudden stinging in my eyes and beheld this cruel, unforgiving world. Goddess curse me. This was as far away from home as I could get.

There was no sea, no warmth, no brightly burning sun. We stood in the hollow of a steep snow-covered trail, barely wide enough to walk on side by side.

A biting wind snarled through the craggy mountain pass and tore through my cloak. Behind us the gates closed with a clank that echoed loudly between the snowcapped mountains. I tensed at the unexpected clamor. It was the first noise I'd heard outside the void and it couldn't sound more foreboding if it tried.

I spun around, heart thundering, and watched demon magic spring up from the bowels of this land and slither up the gates. The same violet-blue thorn-covered vines that had bound Vittoria's diary wound through eye sockets and jawbones, twisting until the off-white skulls glowed with an icy, unearthly hue.

Cold air cut my breath short. I was trapped in the underworld, surrounded by the Malvagi, alone. I'd acted out of fear and desperation—two essential ingredients in creating a disaster. A flash of my twin's desecrated body stamped that feeling into the frozen ground.

"You told me the gates were broken." There was an impressive

bite in my tone. “That demons were slipping through, ready to wage war on Earth.”

“The Horn of Hades has been returned.”

“Of course.”

The devil’s horns were needed to lock the gates. Apparently any demon prince could wield them, and I hadn’t known to ask Wrath for clarification. It was another way he’d worked around the “not being able to directly lie to me” rule of my summoning.

If that part was even true.

I loosened a breath and shifted back around, staring out at the landscape. On our right a sharp drop-off was carved through the frost-coated terrain. In the distance, barely visible through either a covering of fog or a far-off storm, turrets on a castle reached up, pointing spindly fingers of accusation at the heavens.

“Is that…” I swallowed hard. “Is that where Pride lives?”

“Not so anxious to meet him now?” A smug expression ghosted across Wrath’s features before he schooled his face into indifference. “The first circle is Lust’s territory. Think of the layout like the Seven Hills of Rome. Each prince controls their own region or summit. Pride’s circle cannot be seen from here. It sits toward the center, near my House.”

Being so close to Lust’s stronghold wasn’t comforting. I hadn’t forgotten how his demonic influence had made me feel. How I’d lusted after Wrath and drank too much apple-honey wine and had danced without a care in the universe while a murderer hunted witches.

I’d also never forget how hard it had been to crawl back to my senses after Lust had cruelly wrested his powers away, leaving me an empty husk. If it hadn’t been for Wrath’s interference, I might still be in that dark, crushing place.

I could almost feel despair trailing a sharp nail across my throat now, begging, tempting… I pretended that the growing fear was muck beneath my shoes and squashed it.

Wrath watched me closely, his gaze alight with keen interest. Perhaps he was waiting for me to drop to my knees and beg him to escort me back home. It would take far more than standing in the coldest corner of Hell for me to ever lower myself before him.

“I thought it would be warmer,” I admitted, earning an amused look from the demon. “Fire and brimstone—the works.”

“Mortals have peculiar cautionary tales about gods and monsters and their supposed creator, but the truth, as you can see, is very different from what you’ve heard.”

I was distracted from further inquiry by a soft clicking. Up a dizzying incline on our left, a smattering of bare-branched trees stood,

swaying in the arctic wind, their limbs lightly clacking against one another. Something about them reminded me of old crones sitting together, using bones as knitting needles. If I narrowed my eyes, I almost swore I saw the shadowy outline of their figures. I blinked and the image was gone. Almost immediately after, a low growl floated in on the wind.

I glanced at Wrath, but he didn't seem to notice the peculiar vision or hear anything worthy of note. It had been a very long, very emotionally charged day and my imagination was getting the better of me. I shook the unsettling feeling away.

"This is the Sin Corridor," Wrath continued, unknowingly interrupting my worries. "*Transvenio* magic is forbidden on this stretch of land the first time you cross into this realm, so you'll need to travel by foot."

"I have to do it alone?"

Wrath raked his attention over me. "No."

I released a slow, quiet breath. Thank the goddess for small favors. "Why is it necessary for people to pass through here?"

"It is a way for newcomers to form alliances with others who share their dominant sin."

I considered that. "If I tend toward anger, I'd be best aligned with House Wrath." The prince nodded. "And others who are best suited to other sins… would they be put off by other demon houses? Let's say a member of House Wrath consorted with House Sloth; would they be scandalized by the other in some way?"

"Not exactly scandalized, but close. Mortals align themselves with political parties and causes. It's not unlike that here, but we deal in vice."

"Are demons and humans tested the same way?"

Wrath seemed to choose his next words carefully. "Most mortals never reach the Sin Corridor, or the Seven Circles. They tend to imprison themselves on their own separate isle outside the gates, off the western shore. It's a self-inflicted punishment of sorts."

"You don't lock them away in the Prison of Damnation?"

"The isle is the prison. They live in a reality of their own making. At any point they can leave. Most never do. They live and die on their isle and begin again."

It was a hell in its own way. "Nonna said Star Witches were the guardians between realms. Why would mortals and the Wicked need guards if they never leave?"

"Maybe mortal souls—and my brothers—are not all they keep watch over."

Vague and frustrating as always. "I still don't understand why *I* need to be tested at all."

“Then I suggest you heed my earlier warning and focus on surviving.”

He issued it as both a challenge and a haughty command to stop asking questions. I was too worried to verbally spar. Threat of death hung over me, low and dark like the gathering clouds. The stupid prince dragged his gaze over me again, letting it linger on my soft curves.

I wasn’t wearing my amulet—he still had possession of it—so there was no confusing where his focus landed. Even covered by the cloak, I swore I felt the heat of his attention like a physical caress on my skin.

Thoughts of death vanished. “Is there a problem with my bodice?”

“Seems as if your testing has begun. I was checking your cloak.”

I exhaled slowly and bit down on several colorful curses that sprang to mind.

He smirked as if my annoyance pleased him to no end. Still grinning, he swiftly moved down the steep mountain pass, his steps steady and sure despite the snow and ice.

I couldn’t believe… was he packing the snow down so I could walk through it in my delicate shoes? Impeccable demon manners hard at work again.

He really would do anything to see me safely delivered to Pride.

Speaking of that particular sin… I lifted my chin, my tone and demeanor more supercilious than any mortal king or queen born to rule could ever hope to achieve. And why shouldn’t I feel superior? I was about to rule the underworld. It was time Wrath showed some respect to his queen. “I am perfectly able to make my own way. You may run off now.”

“I did not take you for the sort to cut off their nose to spite their face.”

“If I cannot walk through snow without assistance, I might as well slit my throat now and be done with it. I do not need you or anyone else to hold my hand. In fact, I would like you to leave me alone. I’ll make better time without you.”

He stopped walking and glanced over his shoulder. There was no warmth or teasing in his expression now. “Fight the Sin Corridor, or I will leave you to your prideful hubris. You are more susceptible to falling under the influence of a particular sin when showing early attributes of it. That is my final warning and all the help I will give. Take it for what it is, or leave it.”

I gritted my teeth and did my best to follow his trail. With each step I took deeper into the underworld, it felt like the remaining pieces of myself were slowly shedding. I couldn’t help but wonder if anything familiar would be left of me by the time I returned home.

As if in answer to my circling worries, a simmering rage started to burn through me as we traveled for miles in silence. Undoubtedly, I was now being tested for wrath. It was familiar, welcome. Even though I should make sure I aligned best with pride, I tended to my anger while we picked our way down the trail, crossed over a frozen stream, and paused near a slightly wider, flatter expanse that peered over a smaller mountain range.

Clusters of evergreens that looked like the juniper and cedar sketches in Nonna's grimoire fanned out in a semicircle around the easternmost corner where we'd paused.

Above them, angry clouds raced across the sky. Lightning lashed out like a great beast's tongue, and a roar of thunder followed a heartbeat later. Unblinking, I watched as the dark mass galloped closer. I'd witnessed plenty of storms, but none that moved faster than the goddesses who sought vengeance. It was as if the very atmosphere was possessed.

Or perhaps this world resented its newest inhabitant and was making its displeasure known. It had that much in common with Wrath.

A few minutes later, we stopped our relentless march.

"This will have to do."

Wrath removed his suit jacket and draped it carefully over a low-hanging branch. I'd been wrong earlier: his dagger wasn't shoved into his jacket; he wore a leather shoulder holster over his inky shirt, and the gold hilt gleamed as he twisted around. He undid the buttons at his cuffs, quickly rolled back his sleeves, then began gathering ice-coated branches.

"What are you doing?"

"Building shelter. Unless you'd like to sleep in a storm, I suggest grabbing some evergreen branches and beating ice off them. We'll use the ones you collect to lay on."

"I'm not sleeping with you." For many reasons, the most glaring being I was betrothed to his brother and—regardless of the survival aspect—I doubted the devil would be pleased if I snuggled next to another demon prince.

Wrath cracked a branch off the nearest cedar and glanced at me. "Your choice." He swept an arm out. "But I will not nurse you back to health when you fall ill." He gave me a hard look. "If you don't want to freeze to death, I suggest moving swiftly."

Not wanting to be tested for wrath or pride—or any other sin again—I swallowed any further protestations and went searching for branches. I found some a few paces away from where Wrath worked and knocked chunks of snow and ice from them as quickly as I could. Surprisingly, I moved as fast as the demon prince. In moments, I had

almost more than I could carry. Which was good since my fingers were turning red and getting stiff from the cold and wet.

Once I gathered up a heaping armful, I hauled them back to our campsite. Clouds swirled around angrily, and thunder shook the ground. We had minutes left before the first plump drops hit, if we were lucky. Wrath had already created a small circular shelter beneath one of the denser trees and was in the middle of pushing snow up and around the branches he'd driven into the ground. The exterior walls were solid snow, the roof was thatched branches, and we'd both probably have to lay curled on our sides to fit. I couldn't imagine surviving the night in a chamber made of winter's offerings, but Wrath seemed to think we'd be safe.

I looked up; the large evergreen tree towering above us would also provide an added barrier of protection. It was a smart location to choose.

Without turning, Wrath stuck his arm out. "Hand them over."

I did as he not-so-gently asked, giving him one branch at a time, all the while dreaming of whipping him upside the head with them. He laid them in a row, making sure the entire ground was covered in two layers of greens.

He moved swiftly and efficiently, as if he'd done this a thousand times before. And he probably had. I was not the first soul he'd stolen for the devil. But I would be his last.

Once he placed the final branch down, he started unbuttoning his shirt, careful to avoid the leather holster. That he kept on. Powerful muscles rippled as he shrugged out of the shirt, and I couldn't help but stare at the serpent tattoo that wound up and around his right arm and shoulder. It seemed grander here, more detailed and striking.

Maybe that was because his skin looked darker when contrasted against the pale backdrop of this land, and the metallic gold lines stood out more vividly.

I cleared my throat. "Why are you undressing? Are you affected by the magic here, too?"

He looked up. Sweat dampened the dark hair at his brow, making him appear mortal for a change. "Take off your corset."

"I'd rather not." I gave him an incredulous look. "What in the seven hells do you think you're doing?"

"Giving you something to wear so you don't freeze your ass off in that metal." He held his shirt out but pulled it back before I grasped it, eyes glittering with mirth. "Unless you'd prefer to sleep in the nude. Lady's choice."

My face heated. "Why can't you just magic more clothing?"

"Any use of magic during your first journey in the Sin Corridor is considered interference."

"You magicked a cloak."

"Before we crossed into the true underworld."

"What will you sleep in?"

His expression turned positively wicked as he raised a brow.

Oh.

I cursed this world and the devil and marched inside our chamber made of snow and ice and took the proffered shirt. I quickly removed my cloak and set it on the ground. Being a gentleman, Wrath exited the chamber—long enough to retrieve his jacket—and looked me over when he crowded back into the small space. So much for good manners.

His lips twitched as I twisted and tried turning the stupid garment around without touching him. It wouldn't budge. And neither would he. I glared at the demon as if my current predicament was all his fault. He seemed utterly delighted by my anger, the heathen.

"I need your help," I finally said. "I can't undo it myself."

The infernal prince inspected my corset with the same level of enthusiasm as if I'd asked him to recite a sonnet by light of a full moon, but he didn't deny my request. "Turn around."

"Try not to look too thrilled, or I might think you like me."

"Count your blessings. My liking you would be a dangerous thing."

I snorted. "Why? Would you ruin me for all other demon princes?"

"Something close."

He smiled and motioned for me to turn. His fingers moved deftly across the ribbons crisscrossing down my back, tugging and undoing with militaristic precision.

I held the front of my top to keep myself from spilling out as the back fell open a moment later, exposing my skin. Frost-kissed air danced over me.

I'd never gotten out of a corset that quickly before. Either his supernatural senses aided him, or he had *a lot* of practice with undressing women.

Unbidden, a flash of him bedding someone crossed my mind in strikingly vivid detail. I saw perfectly filed nails digging into his back, long, tanned legs wrapping around his hips, soft groans of pleasure escaping as he rhythmically thrusted.

A dark feeling slithered through me at the thought. I ground my teeth together, suddenly biting back a string of accusations as I spun around. If I didn't know any better, I'd think I was…

"Envious." Wrath easily detected my change in mood.

"Stop reading my emotions." I jerked my attention up to his. His expression was wiped clean. Gone was any glint of wry humor or

wickedness. He stood rigidly, as if forcing himself to become an immoveable block of ice. Apparently, the idea of touching me that way was revolting.

"The corridor will continue testing you." He observed the flush staining my cheeks a deep shade of red but didn't comment on it. His attention briefly shifted to my neck before he brought it back up to my eyes. "Shut down as many of your emotions as possible. They're only going to get more intense from this point forward. Aside from fear, this world thrives on both sin and desire in equal measure."

"Isn't desire the same as lust?"

"No. You can desire riches, power, or status. Friendship or vengeance. Desires are more complex wants than mere sins. Sometimes they're good. Other times they reflect insecurities. This world is influenced by those who rule it. Over time it's come to toy with us all."

Avoiding further eye contact, he stepped away, removed his crown, and laid down on the edge of the branches, going so far as to face the opposite direction. Even still, we'd be sleeping entirely too close. There was barely a hand space between us.

Envious. About him rutting like a pig with someone else.

The notion was ridiculous, especially after his betrayal, but the lingering sense of jealousy didn't leave right away. I cursed under my breath and focused harder on getting my emotions under control. The last thing I needed was to have this realm lure me deeper into those seven ruling sins by feeding on my feelings.

I dropped the metal corset/torture device and tugged his shirt on. It was huge on my frame, but I didn't care. It was warm and smelled of the prince. Mint and summer. And something distinctly, unmistakably, male.

I looked over at Wrath. He was still shirtless despite the crispness of the air. Aside from his close-fitting trousers, he only wore the shoulder holster and dagger. It was going to be a long, miserable night. "Aren't you going to put your jacket back on?"

"Stop having filthy thoughts about me and get some rest."

"I should have killed you when I had the chance."

He rolled over to study me, his gaze slow and meandering as it traveled from my eyes, over the curve of my cheeks, and settled on my lips. After a long moment, he said, "Sleep."

I sighed, then sunk to the ground and pulled my cloak over me like a blanket. The small space quickly filled with the scent of cedar and pine. Outside the wind howled. A moment later, small ice pellets assaulted our chamber. Nothing infiltrated our shelter, though.

I lay there for a while, listening to the demon's breathing turn slow and even. Once I was sure he was asleep, I peered at him again;

he slept as if he didn't have a care in the world: the deep slumber of an apex predator. I stared at the shimmering ink on his shoulders, the lines of Latin still too pale and distant to make out.

Against my better judgment, I let myself become curious about what held enough value or importance for him to permanently mark his body with it. I wanted to crack his soul open and read him like a book, discovering the deepest secrets and stories of how he came to be.

Which was foolish.

I tried not to notice the way our matching tattoo had elegantly crawled past his elbow now as well. His double crescent moons, wildflowers, and serpents reminded me of a fairy tale scene captured in a fresco back home. Something about gods and monsters.

I desperately tried not to think about how much I wanted to trace his tattoos, first with my fingertips and then with my mouth. Tasting, exploring.

I especially didn't allow myself to think about *being* the person he'd laid out and made love to. His hard, powerful body moving on top of mine, deep inside of…

I shut that scandalously carnal thought down, shocked by the intensity of it.

Devious Sin Corridor. I was obviously being tested for lust now and, considering my bedmate, that was more dangerous than any hell beast prowling around outside, thirsting for my blood. I don't know how much time passed, but sleep eventually found me.

A while later, I stirred. The storm raged, but that wasn't what roused me. Warm breath tickled my neck in even, rhythmic strokes. Sometime during the night I must have shimmied up against the demon. And, surprisingly, neither one of us had moved.

Wrath lay behind me, one heavy arm draped possessively over my waist as if daring any intruder to steal what he'd claimed as his. I should have scooted away. And not just for propriety's sake. Being this close to him was like playing with fire and I'd already felt his burn, but I didn't *want* to move. I liked his arm on my body, the weight and feel and scent of him curled around me like a python. I wanted him to claim me, almost as much as I wanted him to be *mine*.

The instant that thought came, he stopped breathing steadily.

I inched backward, pressing myself against his chest, still craving more contact.

His hold on me constricted a fraction. "Emilia…"

"Yes?"

We both stilled at the sultry tone of my voice, the longing I couldn't hide. I hardly recognized this openly desirous version of myself. Back home, women were taught that those wants were evil,

wrong. Men could indulge in their baser needs and no one called them ungodly. They were rakes, rogues—scandalous but not ostracized for their behavior.

A man with a healthy sexual appetite was considered to be full of vitality, a prime catch. Experienced for his partner, should he ever decide to wed. While women were taught to remain virginal, pure. As if our wants were dirty, shameful things.

I wasn't human, nor was I a member of the nobility—who suffered more restrictions than I ever had—but I'd certainly been raised with those same notions.

I was no longer in the mortal world, though. No longer bound to play by their rules.

A frisson of surprise shot through me. I couldn't decide if it was from excitement or fear of letting myself remove those shackles here. Maybe I did know, and maybe that was the part that scared me. I wanted something I'd been warned against. And now all I had to do was reach out and welcome it. It was time to be brave, bold.

Instead of being ruled by fear, I could become fearless. Beginning now. I nestled against Wrath again, my choice made. He slowly trailed a hand down the front of my shirt, toying with the buttons. I bit my lip to keep from gasping.

"Your heart is beating very fast."

His mouth grazed the lobe of my ear and—goddess curse me—I arched into the touch, feeling just how much he liked our current position.

His arousal sent a thrill all the way to my toes. I should *not* want this. I shouldn't want *him*. But I couldn't erase the phantom image of him bedding someone else from my mind, or the way it made me feel. I wanted to be the one he took to his bed. I wanted him to desire me in that way. And *only* me. It was a primal, ancient feeling.

One my future husband might not approve of, but I didn't care. Perhaps the only approval I would seek from now on was my own. To Hell, quite literally, with all else. If I was to be queen of this realm, I would embrace each part of it—and my true self—fully.

"Tell me," he whispered, his voice sliding like silk over my flushed skin.

"What?" My own voice came out breathless.

"I am your favorite sin."

At the moment, I wasn't sure I could manage to speak in full sentences. Wrath had teased me before, kissed me furiously and passionately, even, but he'd never tried seducing me.

He undid the first button on my shirt—*his* shirt—taking both infinite care and time meandering down to the next. All rational thoughts fled; his touch reduced me to possessing only one primitive

need: desire. Raw, untamed, and endless. I felt no shame or worry or trepidation.

My chest rose and fell with each quickening beat of my pulse. Another button came undone. Followed by another. The grip on my emotions soon followed. A sizzling fire slowly consumed me from my toes upward. It was a wonder the snow beneath us hadn't melted.

If he didn't touch me, skin to skin, I'd combust. The fifth button popped open, leaving only a few more. I was about to rip the cursed shirt off. Sensing my urge, or perhaps finally giving in to his own, he swiftly undid the remaining buttons and pulled it open, exposing me.

From over my shoulder, he stared down at my body, his gaze darkening as his calloused hand slid across my smooth skin.

He was so tender, so attentive while he stroked my collarbone. When he pressed his palm to my heart, feeling its beat as if it was the most magical source in his world, I thought I might toss him down and bed him right then and there. His light touch was at odds with the mighty, terrifying power that emanated from him.

"Are you nervous?"

Hardly. I was enraptured. Completely at his mercy. Although one look at his raw expression indicated the opposite might be true. I managed to shake my head.

His fingers trailed lower, learning the curve beneath my breast, exploring my stomach and pausing to toy with the serpent belt I forgot I was wearing. If I turned slightly, angled myself up more, he could easily unbuckle it. Which was why he'd stopped. He was waiting for my decision. I thought it was obvious what I wanted.

"Tell me."

I'd rather *show* him. Emboldened, I twisted around, winding one arm around his neck, and sunk my fingers into his raven hair. We might be in Hell, but he felt like Heaven.

His obstinate hands traveled upward to skim my breasts again. He gently squeezed them, the roughness of his skin creating pleasant friction.

He felt as good as I remembered. Better, even. I couldn't help but gasp as his other hand finally obeyed my unspoken desires and slid in the opposite direction. It drifted across my ribs, past my stomach, and lingered right above where I wanted him to explore.

A honeyed heat pooled low in my belly.

Wrath finally slipped his fingers beneath the band of my skirt, brushing the soft skin between my hips, his touch featherlight. *Goddess curse me*. At the moment I didn't care about his lies or betrayal. Nothing mattered except the feeling of his hands on my body.

"Please." I tugged him close. Soft lips brushed against mine. "Kiss

me."

"Say it once." He gently pulled my backside to him, offering a wicked taste of what was to come. His throbbing arousal fanned the flames of my own passions. I wished he'd do that *without* our clothes on. I rubbed against the hard length of him, and whatever control he'd had vanished. He captured my mouth with his, kissing me possessively, hungrily.

One of his hands remained locked on my hip and the other went under my skirts, sliding up my ankle, past my calf, then traveled between my thighs as his kiss deepened and his tongue claimed mine. His fingers were almost to the slick, aching center.

I needed him there. I groaned his name as he finally—

"While your current illusion sounds *wildly* interesting," Wrath's silky voice came from across the small enclosure, "you might want to put your clothes on. The temperature is well below freezing now."

I jerked upright, blinking in the darkness. *What in the seven hells…*

It took a moment to steady my breaths and another to get my bearings. The shirt he'd let me borrow was discarded along with the cloak, and my bare skin puckered in the icy air. My skirts were wrested up around my waist as if I'd been tugging them off and failed.

I stared down at the cooling, empty spot beside me, confused.

"Is something wrong?" Perhaps my new association with House Pride prevented us from intimately associating with each other. "Did we break a rule?"

"I tried to warn you." I couldn't see his face but heard the satisfied, all-too-smug—and very masculine—smile enter his voice, and alarm bells started ringing. "Your longings will taunt and tease you into oblivion if you can't control them. This is a realm of sin *and* desire. It depends on your vices for its survival the same way the human world requires oxygen and water. If you lose control for a second, it will pounce. And not always in the way you believe it will. For example, if you were thinking of hatred, it might test to see if the opposite could be true."

"I—" Goddess above. My lust-addled brain finally caught up with what had happened. He'd said it was an illusion. More like a nightmare. I buried my burning face in my hands, wondering if there was a spell I could use to disappear. "That wasn't real… any of it?"

"One thing I can promise," his voice was deep and sensual in the dark, "is you won't *ever* doubt it's real when I touch you."

Frustrated, embarrassed, and furious to have submitted to desiring him for even one second, I plucked up his shirt and roughly tugged it back on before flopping onto my side. "Someone's cocky."

"Says the person rubbing up against my c—"

"Finish that sentence and I'll smother you in your cursed sleep,

demon."

Wrath's low chuckle had my toes curling and my imagination flying straight back into the fiery pits of Hell. My treacherous mind replayed one little word choice over and over. He'd said *when* he touched me, not *if*. As though he planned on making that erotic fantasy a reality at some point in the future. It was a good long while before sleep found me again.

Only this time I didn't dream of being happily seduced by the forbidden prince.

I dreamed of a vicious, violent murder. And a beautiful woman with starlight eyes, screaming a curse of vengeance into the darkest of nights.

Most disturbing of all, it felt as if I knew her. And her curse had been directed at me.

THREE

Dawn fought its way into our tiny shelter. Not that I could tell for certain what time it was. This world seemed to be stuck in a permanent state of twilight. Maybe the swift approach of the next storm was to blame. So far "overcast" was the preferred state of the atmosphere here. As if proving my theory correct, wind screeched in the distance, raising the small hairs along my arms.

There was only a slight shift in the angle of the light and the way Wrath gruffly said, "Time to move," that indicated it was indeed daytime. I waited for the arrogant prince to mock what happened a few hours ago, but he gave no indication I'd been half-naked and writhing against him, taunted with a sinful illusion of our bodies tangling together.

Maybe it *was* only a dream within a dream.

That hope rallied me up from our makeshift bed. I twisted from side to side, stretching out sore muscles. It wasn't the worst night's sleep I'd ever had, but it wasn't comfortable by any means. A warm bath, a change of clothing, and a good meal were just what I needed.

At the thought of food, my stomach grumbled loud enough that Wrath turned around to look, a slight crease forming between his brows. "We don't have much farther to travel, but, due to the terrain, it will likely take until nightfall to arrive at our destination."

"I'll live."

Wrath seemed skeptical about that but kept his troublesome mouth shut.

I stared glumly at the metal corset top and started unbuttoning the demon's shirt. Might as well get the miserable garment on quickly so we could leave. While I could definitely survive without food for a while, I'd eventually get a headache if it was too much longer.

Vittoria had been the same way. Our father used to tease us, claiming our magic burned a constant stream of energy that needed replenishing, and how it was a good thing we had a restaurant. Nonna would shake her head and shoo him away before slipping us sweets.

A different kind of ache took up residence near my heart. No matter how much I tried to shut it down, thoughts of food quickly turned to thoughts of Sea & Vine, our family trattoria.

Which was a swift emotional punch that almost had me doubling over. I missed my family terribly and I'd only spent one night in the underworld. Time might move differently here, so it was possible just an hour had passed in my world, maybe less.

I hoped Nonna managed to find a safe hiding place for everyone. Losing my twin was devastating, my grief still powerful enough to drown me if I let it surface above the fury for too long. If I lost anyone else… I shoved those worries into a little trunk near my heart and focused on getting through the day. A new thought slipped in.

"Where's Antonio?" I watched Wrath carefully. Not that I would read much if he chose to shield his emotions. "You never told me where you sent him."

"Someplace safe."

He didn't elaborate and it was probably best to let it be for now. We had more important things to focus on. Like making it out of the Sin Corridor without another *prodding* of my desires, and then formally introducing me to Pride and his royal court.

There would be plenty of time in the future to speak with Antonio, the human blade one of the demon princes had influenced to kill my twin. And the young man I used to dream of marrying before I knew the truth of his hatred for witches.

In my haste to get ready, I snapped a button off my borrowed shirt and cringed at the frayed thread. Knowing how fussy my traveling companion was about clothing, I braced myself for a lecture. I glanced up, an apology on my lips, surprised when Wrath shook his head, cutting my words off before I'd given voice to them.

"Keep it." He slipped his black jacket on. I drew my brows together and he quickly noted the suspicion I didn't try to hide. "It's wrinkled and ruined. I refuse to be seen like that."

"Your thoughtfulness is overwhelming. I might swoon."

I inspected his jacket. The luxurious material pulled across his broad shoulders, accentuating the taut muscles and hard lines of his chest. Of course he would prefer to show up half-naked rather than

wear a crinkled shirt in front of any demonic subjects. I almost rolled my eyes at his vanity but managed to keep my expression neutral.

I noticed something I hadn't last night: he wore both amulets now. The first licks of anger bubbled up, but I shoved the feelings down. I'd had enough testing for one day.

He fastened the button above his trousers, leaving an unobstructed visual of his sculpted torso and the barest hint of the leather holster. The demon-forged blade was not his finest weapon—one look at *him* and anyone would hesitate to raise a hand.

Wrath's eyes glinted with rakish pleasure when he saw what had caught my attention. "Would you like me to unbutton it again? Or would you prefer to do that?"

"Get over yourself. I was thinking about how conceited you are, not lusting over you."

"You wished to get under me last night. In fact, you were quite insistent."

I notched my chin up. He could sense a lie, so I didn't bother with them. "Lust does not require liking or even loving someone. It's a physical reaction, nothing more."

"I was under the impression you weren't interested in kissing someone you hate," he said coolly. "Am I to believe you'd be all right bedding them now?"

"Who knows? Maybe it's this realm and its wicked machinations."

"Lie."

"Fine. Maybe I was lonely and scared and you offered a distraction."

I tucked the shirt into my skirts. It was much warmer, and I was excited to leave the metal top behind. I bent to retrieve my serpent belt and fastened it around my waist.

Wrath tracked each of my movements, his golden eyes assessing. Oddly enough, he seemed genuinely intrigued about my answer.

"Why do you care, anyway?" I asked. "It's not as if *you* will be sharing my bed."

"I'm wondering what changed."

"We're in the underworld, for one." His eyes narrowed, detecting even the smallest untruth. Interesting. "Let me clear up any confusion. You're very enjoyable to look at. And on some occasions where logic fails I may desire you, but I'll never *love* you. Enjoy last night's illusion—a fantasy is all it was and all it will ever be."

He gave me a mocking smile as he replaced his crown. "We'll see about that."

"It would be so tempting to place a wager, but I refuse to sink to your level."

His gaze smoldered, reminding me of a banked fire on the verge of

igniting again. “Oh, I believe you’d enjoy every second of descending to my level. Every slip and plunge of your fall will make your pulse pound and your knees quake. Care to know why?”

“Not at all.”

An annoying half-smile ghosted across his face. He leaned in close, his voice dropping impossibly low. “Love and hate are both rooted in passion.” His lips whispered across my jaw as he slowly brought them to my ear. My breath caught from his nearness, his heat. He drew back enough to meet my gaze, his attention falling to my mouth. For a moment, I thought he was going to tip my face up to his, run his tongue over the seam of my lips and taste my lies. “Strange how that line becomes blurred over time.”

My traitorous lips parted on a sigh. Before I registered he’d even moved, he swept out of our little shelter. A shiver slid down my spine. It wasn’t the cold that unsettled me; it was the determination that flashed in his eyes. As if I’d declared war and he refused to walk away from the lure of battle. It wasn’t clear if he was referring to me never loving him, or never bedding him, but provoking the general of war meant trouble either way.

As I pulled my cloak on, I recalled Nonna’s warnings about the Wicked—how once someone caught a demon prince’s attention he’d stop at nothing to claim them.

The way Wrath had looked at me made me think those stories were true. And despite his earlier proclamation about me being the last creature in all the realms he would want, and the fact I was now promised to his brother, something undeniably had just changed.

Goddess help us both.

Morning kicked and screamed its way toward noon as if it were a spoiled child throwing a tantrum. Snow squalls appeared, fierce and howling, and left as quickly as they’d arrived. When I thought the weather had finally turned moderate, ice pelted us.

Frozen strands of dark hair stuck to my face, and my cloak suctioned to my body like a second skin. I was cold and miserable in ways I’d never experienced at home on my warm island. Various body parts either burned or stung from the ice, and I’d long since lost sensation in my feet. I hoped I wouldn’t lose a toe or three to frostbite.

Whenever I felt the first tinges of hopelessness creeping in, I gritted my teeth and pushed on, head down, as the gusting wind continued to snap at me. I refused to succumb to the elements this

early on in my mission. My sister would never give up on me.

It would take far worse than ice to stop me now.

Perhaps this corridor did more than simply test for sins; perhaps battling such vicious elements was a test of grit. Of determination. And uncovering how far one was willing to go for the ones they loved. Both the demons and this realm would discover that answer soon enough.

Wrath either enacted a glamour, or the elements didn't dare to mess with his princely self. His hair was unaffected, and his clothing remained dry. If his cavalier attitude regarding the journey didn't annoy me enough already, the way the weather bent to his will was enough to irk me into an early grave. It was wholly unfair that he should look so damnably good while I looked similar to a sodden wreck that washed ashore after several long, hard months at sea.

The few times it wasn't snowing or hailing or some terrible combination of the two, a thick, chilly mist hung over us like an omen from a nasty winter god. I was starting to think there was a higher power out there who enjoyed toying with travelers.

Time stretched on and on, though the sun never quite made an appearance. There were only various shades of gray tinging the sky. Wrath and I barely spoke after our morning conversation, and I was perfectly fine with that. Soon enough I'd be at House Pride.

After what I estimated to be another hour or two into our journey, I began trembling uncontrollably. The more I tried forcing my muscles to still, the more they rebelled.

Nonna always told us to find the positive in any situation, and now that I was so emotionally and physically drained by the frosty elements, I was spared from being tested by the Sin Corridor.

My shivers quickly grew loud enough to draw Wrath's attention. He ran a calculating gaze over me, mouth tightening, and walked faster. He barked at me to keep moving. To hurry up. To lift my feet. Higher, faster, move, go, *now*. He was the mighty general of war and I could easily imagine how much his soldiers hated him for the drills he ran them through.

When painful pins and needles started pricking my body all over, I distracted myself with a new game. Perhaps it was the Sin Corridor encouraging me, but I envisioned all the ways Wrath could slip over a cliff and splatter himself on craggy rocks. I saw it all so clearly…

… I'd race after him, pulse pounding as I followed the broken branches and destruction left in his wake, his big body crashing violently into everything on its way down. Once I caught up to him, I'd drop to my knees, frantically searching for a pulse. Then I'd swirl my fingers through his warm blood, drawing little hearts and stars in the gore.

He glanced over his shoulder, brows tugged close. “What are you smirking at?”

“I’m fantasizing about painting the world with your blood.”

“Explains the overly indulgent look.” The twisted heathen grinned and the Sin Corridor swiftly ceased pushing me from gluttony to wrath. Before I unleashed myself, he said, casually, “Have I ever told you your anger is like my own personal aphrodisiac?”

No, he had not. But of course the demon ruling over war would be aroused by conflict. I inhaled deeply, attempting to cool my temper and the wrath I was still being prodded toward. “If you wish to keep your favorite appendage intact, I suggest not speaking.”

“Once you finish thinking about my impressive appendage, *I* suggest moving faster. We’ve got a long way to travel. And you look half-dead as it stands.”

“Your talent for making a woman swoon is second only to your charm, Prince Wrath.”

His nostrils flared and I did an abysmal job keeping the amusement from my face. Which only made his scowl deepen. Wrath didn’t taunt me again for another few hours, but it wasn’t from brooding. He was driven, tense. I had a strong suspicion he was more worried than he let on. I did my best to keep up with him, concentrating on the end goal instead of the miserable present. We worked our way down the treacherous pass, time moving in excruciatingly slower increments. I started slipping more, catching myself right before I tumbled over the edge.

Wrath glared at me, rallying my anger enough to press on if only to spite him. I wasn’t sure how long it took for me to notice, but awareness tingled at the back of my muddled senses. Wrath had scouted a good distance ahead, ensuring the terrain was passable, when I’d felt the slight prickle of unease turn into a steady prodding I could no longer ignore.

I stopped walking, and the sound of snow crunching continued for a good half-beat after before falling eerily quiet. I slowly swept my gaze around. Evergreens lined this part of the pass, the branches weighted and bowed from thick snow, making it impossible to see past them into the darker section of woods. Overtaxed tree limbs creaked and groaned. More snow crunched.

I exhaled, my breath mingling with the mist. The haunted atmosphere was caused by the sound of broken branches falling. I turned back around and froze.

A giant, three-headed doglike creature gazed at me, heads tilted, and three sets of ears perked. Its fur was as white as the falling snow and its eyes were glacier blue. Those strange eyes stared into mine, its pupils dilating then contracting.

I didn't so much as breathe too deeply for fear of inciting an attack. Its fangs were twice the size of dinner knives, and they appeared just as sharp. The creature snuffed the air, its wet nose nearly touching my throat as it brought its middle head near.

I swallowed a scream as it took a step closer, those icy eyes lighting with…

Before I could cry out for help, each set of its jaws snapped open and shut as if it wanted to bite me, but changed its mind, much to its shock and mine. It shook its heads, eyes glazed, and stepped away. A predator acknowledging a larger threat. I fell into the embankment and stared, dumbstruck as it slunk backward into the woods, its gaze never leaving mine as it softly snarled.

I didn't breathe again until it disappeared from sight. So much for making a fearless impression on the underworld. "Blood and bones. What *was* that?"

"If you're finished playing with the puppy, I'd like to continue our journey."

"Puppy?"

I swiveled my head in the demon's direction. Wrath stood a few paces away, his powerful arms crossed and an annoying smirk on his face. No assistance, no offer of help. Only mockery at a situation that could have turned ugly very rapidly. Typical demon.

"That was the size of a small horse!"

"Refrain from saddling it up like one. Unlike my brothers, they don't enjoy being ridden."

"Hilarious." I pushed myself to my feet and swiped at the snow on my cloak. As if I wasn't cold and wet enough before. "I could have been mauled to death."

"There are a number of solitary lesser demons who call the woods and outlying lands home. Hellhounds are the least of your concern. If you're finished with the dramatics, let's move. We've wasted enough time."

Of course the demon would call a three-headed hellhound a puppy and say *I* was being dramatic over the encounter. I trudged past him, muttering every obscenity I could recall. His dark chuckle set my feet moving faster, lest the Sin Corridor get any more wicked ideas.

We traveled on, thankfully with no more wildlife encounters. Our biggest challenge was the relentless storm. I silently vowed I'd never fantasize about snow being romantic again.

When I thought our blustery misery was coming to an end, another towering mountain appeared from the mist. I had to lean all the way back and still couldn't see over the top of it.

I bit back a small whimper. There was no chance I could drag my frozen body up and over that behemoth. My head felt strange, a

combination of dizziness and exhaustion. Or vertigo. I considered plopping down right there. Maybe a few minutes of rest would help.

Wrath strode ahead, leaving me where I stood contemplating my near-certain demise. Just like when he'd held a hand to the gates of Hell, he placed his palm against the rock face. Gold light shimmered as he quietly commanded the mountain to do his bidding.

Or maybe he was whispering a threat to a Hell god that owed him a favor.

I was too far away to hear him and I snickered at the thought of his potential demands. I full-out laughed when a section of mountain slid back like his own personal door. Of course. A mountain obeyed his every wish. Why wouldn't it?

Too bad he didn't order the storm to heel like he *should* have done with the hellhound earlier. It probably would have tucked its tail between its legs and raced in the opposite direction.

For some reason, the imagery had me doubling over, laughing so hard tears streamed down my face. A second later, I forgot what was so funny. Snow fell in heavier flakes. My pulse slowed, my heart clenched. It felt like I was dying. Or traveling to an isle of—

Wrath was before me in an instant, his strong hands wrapping around my upper arms. I didn't realize I'd been swaying on my feet until he'd steadied me. Even with his assistance, everything kept spinning wildly and I squeezed my eyes shut, which only made it worse.

I opened them again, and tried to focus on one point to ease the sensation.

Wrath's stern face swam into view.

He looked me over, frowning. If I had the ability to do so, I would have rolled my eyes at his critical assessment of whatever he found lacking. Not everyone was blessed to look like some deviously handsome deity while traipsing through Hell. His lips twitched.

I must have said that last part out loud.

"Perhaps I should carry you the rest of the way. If you're commenting on my godlike looks, you must be tremendously ill."

"No. Absolutely *not*."

I staggered toward the opening he'd made in the mountain, desperate to get out of the snow. I accomplished two steps into the dark tunnel before my legs were swept out from under me and a warm, muscular arm banded across my shoulders, holding me in place.

I squirmed, humiliated to be carried like a rag doll or child. Wrath was unfazed by my attempts to get free. As the soon-to-be Queen of the Wicked, this was *not* the first impression I wanted to make. Half-delirious, half-frozen, and wholly reliant on a demon.

Wrath had once said power was everything here, and, even through my delirium, I knew relinquishing mine for a moment would mark me as an easy target.

"Put. Me. Down."

"I will."

My head rolled back, landing in the nook between his shoulder and neck. He was deliciously warm. "I meant now."

"I'm well aware of that."

The world swayed with each of his steps, grew darker. It was suddenly an effort to stay awake. My skin felt oddly tight. Everything was too cold. Sleep would make all of that go away. And then I could dream. Of my sister. Of my life before I'd ever summoned a demon. And of the time I'd foolishly believed love and hate were nowhere close to being the same emotion.

"I hate you." My words came out slower than they should have. "I hate you in the darkest of ways."

"I'm well aware of that, too."

"My future husband cannot see me like this."

I felt more than saw him smile. "Knowing you, I'm sure he'll see much worse."

"Grazie." Jerk. I nestled against his warmth and sighed, undermining my own demands to be set down. I'd only rest for a minute. "Do you think I'll like him?"

Wrath's steps never faltered, but he held me a little tighter. "Time will tell."

I dozed off and jerked awake what I hoped was only a moment or two later. Between the darkness of the tunnel and his steady, rhythmic stride, it was difficult to stay alert. Nonsensical thoughts and memories crowded into my head and spilled from my lips. "You said you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?"

The rumble of his voice vibrated in my chest. It was oddly comforting. I pressed my cheek against his heart, listening to it beat faster. Or maybe that was wishful thinking. His bare skin blazed against mine. Almost painfully so. "Take care of me. You said you wouldn't…"

He didn't respond. Not that I expected him to. He was not soft or kind. He was hard and rough and fueled by rage and fire. He understood battle and war and strategy. Friendship wasn't any of those things. Especially one involving a witch. I was a mission to him, a promise he'd made to his brother, nothing more. That I understood, even if it stung deep down. I had my own goals, my own agenda. And I wouldn't hesitate to destroy anyone who interfered with my plans.

Even him.

Sleep finally wrestled me into its embrace and I relaxed against Wrath's body. Maybe he'd surprise me by sneaking us into House Pride through a secret entrance to avoid any nosy demons. I could only hope he'd grant me some mercy.

From somewhere far away, I could have sworn he whispered, "I lied."

FOUR

"Is she dead?" It took a minute to place, but I recognized the voice. Anir. Wrath's human second in command. The demon responded with an obscenity that sounded an awful lot like *Of course not, you fucking idiot*. "Can you blame me? She looks plenty dead. Maybe you should let fate run its course. No one will blame you if her heart stops. Not even—"

"Careful. I don't recall asking your opinion."

Calloused fingers poked at my throat, grabbed my wrist. I struggled to sit up but was strapped to something rock hard and unmoving. "Your majesty, we should alert the matron. I don't think this is—"

"Get a mug of warm water and blankets. Now."

My skin felt like someone had tossed me into a fire and held me there. Drinking something warm or putting on a blanket was the last thing I wanted to do. I thrashed in my chains and one of them broke free and smoothed my hair back. Arms, not chains. Wrath still held me against his body. I tried to open my eyes but couldn't. He took a few steps and placed me carefully on a mattress. At least I hoped that's what it was.

Which meant… my heart thundered. We must be at the devil's castle now. Panic had me clawing at his arms as he tried to pull away. Despite my earlier bravado, I did not want to be alone with the king of demons. At least not like this. "N-no… no…"

"Don't move too much, or your heart might stop."

I sucked in a sharp, ragged breath. “Y-your bedside m-manner—”

“Is abominable? There’s a reason I’m not a healer. Complain later. You’ve got a mild case of hypothermia.” He gently disentangled himself from my death grip and drew back. I could have sworn he brushed his lips across my burning forehead before his weight fully lifted from the bed. When he spoke, his tone was hard enough to make me question if the kiss had been real. “Lie still.”

Fabric ripped. My eyes flew open as shock rippled through me. Wrath leaned over my body, tearing my frozen clothing down the center like it was no more substantial than a piece of parchment. Skirts, shirts, belt. A few more tugs and cool air blew across my scorched skin.

I almost groaned with pleasure as he pulled my damp clothes out from under me and tossed them away. I didn’t even care that I was naked in front of the demon. Again.

I wanted to claw my flesh off and submerge my body in a tub of ice. Which was odd considering I’d been freezing not long ago. My eyes drifted shut and no matter how hard I fought, I couldn’t reopen them. Odd images played across my mind. Memories blurred and broken flitted through a thick mist, a possible result of a dying brain. Or maybe it was visions of a future I’d never know, taunting me. Statues and flowers. Fire. Hearts in jars, a wall of skulls.

Nothing made sense.

“Emilia… stay with me.”

Wrath picked up my hand and gently massaged warmth into each of my fingers. If he was trying to keep me awake, it wasn’t working. A drowsy peace fell over me, and I relaxed under his touch, the memories and strange images fading. He moved his careful ministrations from my fingers to my wrist then slowly up my arm to my elbow, before tending to my other hand.

Once he finished rubbing life back into my fingers, he shifted lower on the bed. He lifted my leg at the ankle with one hand, and used the other to work the feeling into my toes much the same way he had with my fingers. The pads of his thumbs slipped to the arch of my foot, and I softly groaned as he used *just* the right amount of pressure to heal the ache there.

Someone rapped at the door and Wrath ordered them to leave everything outside. Footsteps thundered across the room, a door swung open and slammed shut, then he was back, gently covering my body with the softest fabric I’d ever felt.

I choked on a scream. It felt as if he’d poured kerosene over me and lit a match. I kicked the blanket off and earned a frustrated growl from the demon.

“Stop.” He pressed me down and folded me into the blanket again.

A heaviness settled beside me a breath later. Two large arms wound around my body, tugging me closer, his chin resting on my head. He looped a leg over my hip, securing our connection.

He felt like fire. And I was already burning. I tried to roll out from under him, aiming for the ground. I wanted to crawl under the floorboards and bury myself in the earth like an animal deep in hibernation. Wrath's grip never faltered; I was trapped against his body. And, with his supernatural strength, no amount of struggling would break his grasp if he chose to hold on. Survival kicked in—I became a feral cat clawing at the one trying to cage me.

Wrath's arms were twin bands of steel.

"Get *off* me."

"No."

"Didn't your maker teach you proper ways of treating women?"

"Live through the night and I'll respect your wishes then," he snapped.

"You don't understand…" I was mad with fury and wild with the need to move. His arms tightened around me, but never painfully so. "I need to be in the earth. I have to go below ground now."

"That's a common symptom of hypothermia. The feeling will pass when you're stable again." He slid an arm behind my shoulders and angled me up. "Sip this. *Now*."

His tone indicated that he'd pinch my nose and force it down my throat if I didn't listen. Coddling nursemaid he was not. I took a tentative sip of warm liquid and held in a scream. Everything was too hot. Wrath lowered me back onto a pillow and slowly pulled another blanket on me. It was featherlight but hurt tremendously. Pain intensified until it was all I knew.

I clamped my teeth together, trying to force the chattering to stop. Blessedly, mere moments after drinking the liquid, I drifted in and out of various degrees of consciousness. I wondered what he'd put in the drink to make me drowsy but couldn't muster enough energy to feel threatened. If he wanted me dead, he would have let nature handle that deed.

Movement drew me out of my fevered battle with lucidity sometime later. I forgot where I was. Who I was with. Warm light gilded a large silhouette.

I squinted, wondering who had sent an angel. Then I remembered. If the heavenly being staring down at me had ever been an angel, he was something *other* now. Something to be feared and avoided. Something that made hearts pound and knees quake.

He was as forbidden as the fruit offered to Eve, but somehow even more tempting.

In a dreamlike state, I watched Wrath perform the most peculiar

tasks. Refilling a mug of warm liquid. Helping me sip it until a honeyed heat slowly spread through me. Peaceful and calming, a direct contrast from the inferno I'd felt earlier. He fussed with more blankets. Stoked wood in a massive fireplace across from a bed made of midnight. The sheets were the white and silver of shooting stars. They were strangely familiar, though I'd never seen them.

At one point I rolled over to face him and stared at a sheen of sweat glistening on his bare skin. Sometime during the night he'd removed the two amulets. He was tucked into the blankets, too, arms wrapped around me in a comfortable embrace, his body heat fueling mine. He was extraordinary. And it had nothing to do with his physical appearance.

I dragged my attention up to his eyes. Black flecks dotted his gold irises like tiny stars circling his pupils. He watched me inspect his features, his focus scanning my face in the same intent way. I wondered what he saw when he looked at me, how he felt.

"Sometimes," my voice came out scratchy and soft, "sometimes I think I want to be your friend. Despite the past. Maybe aligning ourselves, our separate Houses, is something to consider."

His jaw tightened, as if the mere idea of friendship or an alliance was appalling. "Rest."

Fire now blazed in the room and my lids closed as if he'd commanded them to obey. The world grew foggy. "Wrath…" I wanted to say "thank you" but my words were stolen by sleep.

He spoke in whispers and hushed tones. Smoothed hair from my face with his big, tattooed hand. It felt like he was sharing a secret—something vital. Important in a way that would forever change my reality. I burrowed closer, straining to listen. His voice rumbled through me like a distant storm, trying to shake something awake before it went slumbering again.

I couldn't retain anything and drifted off once more.

The next time I awoke, Wrath's side of the bed was empty. Without his massive body, and constant glowering or not-so-gentle fussing, the room felt too big.

A room.

I sucked in a sharp breath, instantly alert. The worst of my delirium was gone, and reality felt like a mountain crashing down on me. Wrath had taken me to… I wasn't sure. I didn't get a good look at where I was yesterday. I wiped the remnants of sleep from my eyes

and stared up at a smattering of constellations. They were wholly unexpected.

I blinked at them—the ceiling had been painted to look like a sky full of stars. Though that wasn't quite right, either. On closer inspection, the constellations were actually tiny lights glowing softly in a ceiling painted a bruised shade of dark blue.

I swept my attention around the chamber. It was enormous. Elegant.

The walls were a pure snowy white with panels of decorative molding and trim, and the massive fireplace across from the bed was edged in silver that reflected the flames in its shiny surface. A giant, ornate mirror hung above it. Silver sconces sat to either side of the mantel. Another identical set was on the wall behind the bed. I was surprised to see silver and not Wrath's signature gold, though I had a suspicion the metal was actually white gold.

A dark blue rug exactly matched the hue of the ceiling, and the bed seemed to be carved from the same gemstone that surrounded the gates of Hell. Layered on top of the dark carpet was a yellow rug woven through with gold thread.

All of the fabrics looked soft, luxurious, and smelled faintly of crisp winter air and musk.

On the far side of the room, a set of glass chairs and a matching table were tastefully placed in a nook. If not for their edges glinting in the blazing fire, my attention might have skipped over them entirely. Next to the fireplace an enormous armoire made from dark wood stood tall and imposing. Little flowers and stars and snakes were carved into its doors. Crescent moons formed the handles. They reminded me of an incomplete triple goddess symbol. Beside the wardrobe was a door that either led to another chamber or a corridor.

This was a far cry from the abandoned palace Wrath had commandeered in my city.

I twisted around. On my left another door led to a bathing room, if the splashes of water were any indication. A large canvas painting hung beside it. The frame was silver, as ornate as the mirror above the fireplace, and must have cost a small fortune.

The painting itself looked like an enchanted forest taken straight from the pages of a fairy tale. Deep green and rich brown oils brought the landscape to life. Flowers in a riot of dark colors dotted the foreground. Vines of ivy wound around massive tree trunks.

Fruit trees offered ripe treats from apples to fat pomegranates bursting with seeds, to various citruses. Mist floated above soil near the center, and frost coated the petals of the flowers on the right. The artist's palette was dark, yet muted. The scene alive, yet frozen. Summer inhabited one side and it was ice-kissed with winter on the

other.

It was a seasonal garden unlike any I'd ever seen in real life. I had a sudden urge to find the artist who painted it at once, curious about the inspiration behind such a unique piece. If it was based on a real location, I wanted to visit it. But first…

I glanced down at myself. The only clothes I had had been ripped from my body in Wrath's frenzied attempt to get me warm, and discarded the goddess knew where. I sighed and yanked the sheets up, attempting to tie them into a makeshift dress.

Someone cleared their throat.

The uptick in my pulse indicated who it was before I brought my focus up to his. My heart rate spiked impossibly higher the moment our gazes connected and locked.

Wrath leaned against the doorframe, dark hair tousled and damp, new suit pressed to perfection, his expression bordering on contemplative. He scanned me slowly, his gaze sharp and clinical in its assessment. An ebony robe embroidered with wildflowers dangled from his fingertips. "You're awake."

"You're observant."

"Play nice. I'm the one with your robe."

My attention slid to the clothing in question. I was at a clear disadvantage, one I intended to remedy at once. "Where are we?"

"A bedchamber, from the looks of it."

Interminable ass. "Yours?"

He shook his head, not elaborating further. I silently counted to ten. Wrath waited, one side of his mouth tipped up, as if irking me was his most treasured diversion.

If he desired an argument, I was more than happy to oblige. Until I recalled what he'd said about anger being an aphrodisiac and bit my tongue. "Are we at Pride's royal House?"

"No. This is House Wrath."

"The contract…"

"Do you want to go there?" His tone was carefully neutral.

Something about the question felt like a trap, and I did not wish to find myself in any demon's snare so soon, if ever. I swallowed hard. "I made a blood vow."

"That doesn't answer my question."

As if he answered all of mine. I took a page from his book of secrets and lobbed a question back at him. "What does it matter? I signed it. It's done."

"Do you *want* to go there?" he repeated. Of course I did not want to go there or stay here, for that matter. I wanted to do what I came here to do and go home. The faster, the better. I pressed my lips together, unwilling to answer aloud, and forced myself to think of

something pleasant. He sensed emotions and lies. And I had a theory I needed to test. His eyes narrowed as he scanned my face, searching for the truth hidden in it. “Is that a yes?”

I nodded.

A rare bout of emotion flashed in his face, but he recovered quickly and crossed the room in a few long strides. If I hadn’t been studying him, I would have missed the lightning-fast reaction. Now rage flickered in his eyes. A mask to cover his hurt.

“Don’t worry. When my brother rouses himself from the near-constant parties and debauchery, and when his cursed pride finally surrenders enough to allow me entry into his hateful domain, I’ll hold up my end of the bargain.”

I was fairly confident each of their domains were hateful in their own way but didn’t bother pointing that out. “We need to be invited?”

“Unless you’d like to start a feud between our Houses, yes.”

I mentally filed away the information. Feuding princes would certainly create a diversion from more seemingly innocuous pursuits, such as gossip. “If you enter his territory without his consent, it’s taken as a threat? Even if you’re doing his bidding?” Wrath nodded. “That makes little sense. Is it because he’s the king and wants to remind you of your place?”

“Royal posturing is a favorite pastime here for some.”

Which didn’t exactly answer *my* questions. Prince Wrath, one of the Feared and Mighty Seven, General of War, and Master of Avoidance. A devious idea sprang to mind. I schooled my features into bland interest and locked my smile away. Wrath had plenty of masks in his arsenal. It was time to add some to my collection.

“As his bride, what if I decide to go to him alone? Am I not technically part of House Pride? If so, I don’t see how that rule should apply to me. Unless he’s still dedicated to his first wife, which cannot be true if he’s as debauched as you claim. I’m sure he’d welcome me into our marital bed.”

I doubted Wrath realized it, but the room chilled a fraction. I’d struck a nerve.

“Pride will gladly welcome you and anyone else he’s fascinated by into his bed. All at once if he desires to do so, and if you permit it the nights you’re with him. Though I suggest pretending he is the supreme lover, else you’ll injure his namesake sin and find yourself alone.”

I was so stunned, I forgot the seeds of discord I’d been trying to plant. “You cannot be serious. Pride would desire another in our bed? With me? I don’t understand.”

Wrath hesitated a minute. “On occasion, my brother enjoys multiple lovers.”

“At the same time?” I felt my face flame as he slowly nodded.

“Sex isn’t viewed as shameful or sinful here, Emilia. Attraction and desire are part of the natural order of life. Mortals put restrictions on such things. Princes of Hell do not.”

“But Lust… his influence. It’s considered a sin, even here.”

“My brother mostly toyed with your happiness, things that bring all manner of pleasure and joy, not just carnal urges. Being tested or prompted toward one particular emotion usually means it’s something this realm senses you struggle with.” He canted his head. “If you are interested in sex but fear passion or intimacy, you may experience a higher rate of sexual desire until you work through your personal issues regarding it. Which one intimidates you?”

I swallowed hard, uncomfortable with the topic of pleasure while I was alone with Wrath, and naked beneath my silken sheets. “Neither. And it’s hardly your concern. Discussing what I may or may not do with my husband is inappropriate. Especially with you.”

Wrath tossed the robe next to me on the mattress, his expression cold. “You’re welcome for keeping you alive. By my count that’s twice. And not a lick of gratitude for either.”

His tone made my blood boil. I wondered if he knew his magic was leaking out, affecting me so potently. Maybe being inside his House of Sin exacerbated my fury, along with the realization that I was woefully inexperienced in certain areas. I hadn’t thought about bedding Pride, or considered any other wifely duties I might be required to complete. I felt trapped. My bubbling anger needed an outlet, and Wrath seemed game.

“Do you always require profuse thanks for doing the decent thing? I’m starting to think your sin is actually pride, not wrath. Your ego’s definitely fragile enough. Maybe I should grovel at your feet or throw a parade in your honor. Will that satisfy you?”

“Careful, witch.”

“Or what? You’ll sell my soul to the highest bidder?” I scoffed. “Too late. Let’s not forget if it wasn’t for you and your deception, I wouldn’t even be here, nearly freezing to death, or having to worry about bedding your brother and whoever else he invites between our sheets!”

“*You* chose House Pride.”

“Why are you even still here? I thought you’d leave the second you gained your freedom. Have you not tormented me enough? Or is your duty not completely fulfilled until my marriage is consummated? If that’s what you’re waiting for, I’m sure Pride will invite you into the room to bear witness, ensuring I lay back and take it like a good little queen.”

If hatred could be captured with one look, he’d mastered it. “There are clothes for you in the wardrobe. Wear whatever you like.

Do whatever you like. Go wherever you like in this castle. If you decide to leave House Wrath, good luck. I'll return when Pride sends a summons. Until then, good evening, *my lady*."

He stormed out of the room, his footsteps echoing into another chamber before a door opened and shut and I heard him thunder down the hall. I blew out a frustrated breath.

That demon stoked my anger like no other.

Miserable beast. How dare he demand truth when he didn't offer any in return. I waited for my pulse to calm itself. I *was* thankful for everything he'd done last night. And if he'd given me an opportunity, I would have told him his efforts were appreciated. He didn't need to rub the arches of my feet. That had nothing to do with frostbite and everything to do with tenderness.

"Goddess curse us both." I sighed. I hadn't meant to get so furious or to snap about the cave, but the feelings had been festering. Best to lance that wound and be done with it.

Despite the tense escalation of our argument, my little experiment was a partial success; Wrath could only detect a lie *for certain* when I spoke. It was a trick to add to my mental journal.

I glanced at the door and considered chasing him to wring his neck or kiss him senseless but shut those urges down. To find out what really happened to Vittoria, I'd have to disentangle myself from him eventually. And I might as well start now. I didn't know all of the rules and etiquette of the demon realm, but at least I now knew the princes didn't infringe on one another's royal domain. Once I left for House Pride, Wrath and I would not see each other again. At least not for a while.

My lady.

What nonsense that was.

My attention settled on the robe and a strange feeling had my heart racing. I didn't notice while the demon held it across the room, but the flowers embroidered on it matched our tattoos.

The pale lavender ink symbolized a betrothal I'd accidentally forced between us when I'd first summoned him. He knew within moments what I'd done and hadn't bothered telling me the truth. I'd found out weeks later from Anir, the night we'd stumbled across another murdered witch in an alleyway. Wrath swore he was going to tell me, that he'd been waiting until our trust was built to reveal our impending marriage, but I doubted it.

Everything he did was calculated. Every move, strategic. There were games he was still playing and secret agendas he had that I hadn't begun to figure out yet. Maybe they related to my sister's murder, and maybe they didn't. No matter how tightly he guarded his secrets, one way or another I'd find out what he was truly after. If I'd

learned anything about him at all, it was the endless lengths he'd travel to get what he desired.

I looked down at my inked arm. I'd thought the matching tattoos would vanish when I'd cast a spell of un-making to end the betrothal that same night. They didn't.

Despite the broken magic, they kept growing like seeds that had been planted and tended. Bits of each of us fed the design: his serpents, my flowers, the twin crescent moons within a ring of stars. They were a constant reminder of my inexperience and his lies of omission.

I traced the delicate stems and petals replicated on the robe, the fabric silky and cool. It was so beautiful, the exact thing I'd choose for myself if given enough resources to have such a fine garment made. He knew that. Knew me.

Maybe more than I gave him credit for. And yet, *he* still remained a mystery to me.

I gathered up the robe, swung myself out of bed, and stood naked before the crackling fire. Hours ago I was near death, my skin burning from ice, not fire. He'd stayed the whole night, cradling me against his body. A body that was not ice-cold as Nonna used to claim in her stories of the Wicked. He could have summoned a royal healer to do the task.

He also could have let me die like Anir suggested. But he didn't.

I held the fabric to my face, breathed in Wrath's lingering scent, then tossed it straight into the flames.

FIVE

"Death by wardrobe" was destined to be the epitaph on my gravestone, thanks to Wrath's obsession with fine clothing and exquisite fabric. There were so many dresses and skirts and bodices and corsets and tunics and stockings and delicate, lacy undergarments and silk nightgowns and dressing robes, I had to close the carved doors and step back. It was too much.

At home I'd had a handful of simple corset-less dresses and frocks made of muslin. Two pairs of shoes. Sandals and lace-up boots. A few blouses and homespun skirts. Vittoria and I would often share clothing to make our meager closet appear larger than it was.

The items inside this wardrobe were unlike anything I'd seen in the mortal world. And it wasn't simply the daring styles and scandalous amount of skin I'd be showing. It was the vibrant colors, detailed embroidery, and whimsical nature of them.

I took a deep breath and opened the armoire again. Shoes ranging from slippers to small-heeled shoes to boots in a rainbow of dark colors lined the bottom of the wardrobe. Blacks, charcoals, deep maroons, golds, and even some dark purple and silver.

Ribbons, lace, leather. Gowns with exotic and fantastical patterns featuring thorns and serpents and flowers and fruits and glittering fabrics to rival the night sky. Silks, tulles, velvets, and something that was so soft and fuzzy I rubbed it against my cheek.

Cashmere. A half-forgotten memory sparked to life. A little cabin deep in a frozen wood; a plume of silver smoke snaking into the sky.

Whispers and cauldrons and… and Nonna had given Vittoria and me cashmere gloves when we'd visited her friend in northern Italy once. I liked the material then and loved it now. I pulled the pale lavender-gray dress out and swallowed hard.

"Oh."

Fashion in the Seven Circles was a lot more formfitting and revealing than the clothing in my world. This dress would fit like those gloves and fall to mid-thigh. If I was lucky.

It was the obscenest piece of clothing I'd ever encountered, shorter than any nightgown designed for those who plied their trade in pleasure-houses. I wondered what it would be like, confidently owning my body and sensuality, neither apologizing nor simpering to anyone.

Suddenly, I imagined wearing the dress while I picked a fight with the demon who'd chosen it…

… his gaze would darken as it roved over me in a furiously slow way, making my blood boil. I'd shove him against the nearest hard surface, breathless as he flexed his fingers on the soft fabric at my thighs, carefully considering his next move.

Perhaps his troublesome mouth would taunt and tease while he strategized ways to wring pleasure from me. He'd whisper all sorts of filthy promises, heating me to my core instead of shocking me. I'd lean in and nip at his lower lip, a warning and a plea.

I would happily inform him that I was no longer fearful of my passions or willing to deny myself. That shame was the last thing I felt when he was in my arms.

He'd kiss me then, slow and deep. A commanding exploration of my mouth, my body. Proof of making good on his wicked promises. I'd feel his desire pushing against me, hard and warm and thrilling. My satisfaction over affecting him as much would slide into need faster than I could draw my next breath. I'd press against him, wanting to feel *more*.

It wouldn't take much for him to wrench the dress up over my hips, drop to his knees, and kiss his way up—

"Blood and bones."

I shook myself from the magically induced illusion. This realm and its nudges would take *a lot* of getting used to. It wasn't as strong as it was in the Sin Corridor, but that same darkly seductive magic was there, lingering, testing, teasing.

Another unfortunate complication. I'd have to carefully mind each of my thoughts and feelings. I quickly put the dress back and snatched a dressing robe, banishing thoughts of Wrath.

Thinking about the prince of this House of Sin while standing near my bed without a stitch of clothing was a courtship with trouble. After

I slipped the robe on, I tied the silk belt around my waist and thumbed through the clothing once more.

I held up another gown that was slightly closer in style to clothing from home. Well, dresses a princess or noblewoman might own. This one had a strapless corsetlike top in an endless matte black. A sleek skirt that would hug my hips and fan out mid-thigh before dramatically cascading to the floor. Satiny black piping edged each line of the top and circled the waist. It was a far cry from the simple blouses and skirts I was used to wearing to work.

Pangs of homesickness hit me. All the finery in the world couldn't replace the comfort I felt with my family. I wanted to be standing in the kitchen of Sea & Vine, listening to the symphony of sounds my mother, Nonna, and sister made as we worked on our dishes. Knives chopping, pans sizzling, spoons clattering, and all of us happily humming while we shared gossip from the marketplace. My father and uncle Nino chatting merrily with diners.

The scent of savory food wafting around… That simple, happy life was over.

Ready or not, I needed to step into this new role and own it. So I would. Both literally and figuratively. Starting at once.

I gathered up the gown and strode into the room the prince had washed up in, then halted.

"Divine goddesses above."

Every surface reflected my shocked expression back at me. Floors, ceiling, sunken tub, vanity—everything was made of either solid crystal, frosted glass, or white gold. Candles flickered from a circular chandelier. The chamber gleamed softly like I'd crossed from the underworld and stepped directly onto the surface of the moon.

The only bits of color came from an assortment of makeup in tidy piles on the vanity. Brushes for eyes and face and hair. Jeweled clips and tiaras and pins. Flower buds for my locks. Pots of multicolored inks for my lips. Crushed gold that could be dusted across my face or body, delicate perfume bottles with pale pinks and purples and hues I had no exact name for.

I set aside the gown and picked up one perfume and inhaled. Lilac and maybe almond with a hint of bergamot. Vittoria would have adored the assortment of scented riches. I swallowed the lump forming in my throat and grabbed the lilac perfume. I dabbed a bit on each wrist and rubbed them together. It was heavenly. I smelled another that reminded me of honeysuckle and birchwood and heavy whipping cream. Perhaps a tiny hint of gardenia, too. Another smelled almost exactly like hyacinth, reminding me of lush spring mornings.

I smiled a little to myself; Vittoria's passion for creating perfume aided me with singling out different notes. For a minute, I could

almost close my eyes and pretend she was here now. The moment passed, a temporary shadow cast from a cloud racing past the sun.

I inspected each bottle and all of the items Wrath had supplied. Nothing surprised me as much as the fresh flowers. A crystal vase sat on the vanity beside the makeup.

Fragrant blossoms in whites and pale blues and rose-gold pinks cascaded around a smattering of ferns and eucalyptus stuck throughout the arrangement. The flowers were all lovely, almost exactly what was found in the human world, except they were coated in ice.

I breathed them in, surprised their scent penetrated the frost. My fingers trailed over the icy petals. I wondered if the flowers were Wrath's idea or if someone else had sent them.

Someone like my soon-to-be husband. I stopped wondering. It didn't matter.

My attention swept across the sunken glass tub; it took up almost the entire center of the room. I could swim from side to side and do laps in it. It was one of the grandest things I'd ever seen. Before bed I'd definitely take a swim. Now I had things to do, secrets to uncover. And seven demon courts to slowly infiltrate, starting with House Wrath.

Thus far the underworld was wildly different from what I'd heard about it from mortal religion. I had much to learn if I had hopes of sorting truth from fiction while here.

A quick bath was all I could spare time for. I removed my robe and waded in, quickly scrubbing my skin and hair with a bar of soap laid atop folded linen. The water was a perfect temperature. Not too hot or cold, but delightfully warm. Part of me reconsidered my plan to quickly bathe and instead spend the rest of the evening floating in heaven.

With a sigh, I rinsed off and pulled myself from the tub. The length of linen I found near the water's edge was big enough to towel off my whole body.

Once I was properly dry, I picked up the gown. Goddess bless me and the demon who ordered this wardrobe, the dress was designed to be put on without assistance. I shimmied it up over my hips and chest. Little hook-and-eye closures ran up the side and clasped with ease.

I went back to my bedchamber and rummaged around until I found a pair of heeled black shoes coated in a glittery charcoal dust and slipped them on. They fit perfectly, just like the gown. Wrath was nothing if not a perfectionist.

I returned to the bathing chamber, ready to address the matter of my hair. My attention slid to the makeup. Our family didn't have money for such a large assortment of luxury items.

I sat on the crystal stool and applied some kohl to my upper lash line. My fingers hovered above a beautiful set of orange blossoms sewn carefully onto hairpins. At home, I wouldn't second-guess my choice to weave them into my hair. But here…

I chose a violent, bloody shade of red and painted my lips the color of murder instead.

The wardrobe and the clothing weren't the only bits of extravagance I discovered.

Wrath had set me up in a bedroom suite fit for a queen. Not only did I have a bathing chamber that almost rivaled the entire size of my family home, there was also a sitting room, a bedroom, and another room that seemed to be designed for lounging or receiving guests or dedicated to whatever other leisurely activity I wished. There was an inviting divan that looked perfect for curling up with a good book. I was unsure what to do with so much space.

A rack of bottles that appeared to be expensive spirits filled one wall in the leisure chamber. I ran a finger over the cool glass, peering into each one. Different petals and crushed herbs infused the liquor inside. Bribery, no doubt. I left them unopened and continued my inspection. Every room was finely appointed, the furniture plush and welcoming, if not edged in elegance. It seemed that the demon prince was trying to impress me.

Or perhaps he was trying to apologize for the whole soul-stealing unpleasantries between us. Betrayal went down easier if it was served with fine demon liquor, personal suites in luxurious palaces, and expensive gifts. At least according to *him*.

Though, I suppose, he also might be showing respect to his future queen. Apparently being betrothed to Pride came with some benefits, even in a rival demon House.

I strode through the bedroom, heading for the exit I found in an antechamber. It was going to take more than decadent furnishings and pretty dresses to fix our current situation. For one, the prince might start with an apology. Then perhaps we might have an honest conversation.

I wanted to settle whatever was brewing between us before I left for my husband's castle. I did not need any more animosity between House Wrath and myself.

I had enough to worry about as it stood.

A knock came at the door just as my hand closed around the knob.

I yanked it open, ready to give Wrath hell for being such a pimpled ass.

"Oh." I blinked at Anir. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Nice to see you again, too."

Anir held a covered tray in one hand, and a bottle of what looked to be wine in the other. His long midnight hair was pulled into a neat knot at the base of his neck and his scar gleamed silver against his tawny skin. The suit he wore now was much finer than the first time I'd met him in Palermo. I didn't see his deadly demon blade but knew he was likely armed.

"I didn't mean—"

"You did. And I don't mind." He winked. "Thought you might be hungry. Or want to get drunk."

My attention darted into the elegant stone corridor with arches rivaling any grand cathedral. Empty. "Did your prince send you to spy on me?"

"Have some food and wine and find out. I'm a terrible gossip when I'm deep into my cups."

I highly doubted Anir was ever impaired enough to not mind what he was saying. Wrath would never trust him if he let secrets slip after a few glasses of wine or spirits. I wrinkled my nose at the bottle. "Isn't it a bit early for drinking?"

"It's well into evening. You slept most of the day."

I swept my arm in welcome and closed the door behind him. Anir set the tray and bottle on the glass table in the corner and tugged the lid off with a grand flourish. Fruits, cured meats, hard cheese, marinated olives, and crostini were laid out with expert care.

I stared emotionlessly at the spread.

"Wrath acted like human food wasn't something he was exposed to. Another lie?"

"No." Anir pulled two glasses from a little mirrored cabinet near the table and poured us each a generous amount of wine. "I stock up on supplies from the human world whenever I can. Mostly hard cheese and cured meat and various nuts and wheats and rice. Things that can be easily stored or dried." He handed over my glass of wine. "His highness made sure I brought these items back. He thought you might want something that reminded you of home tonight. Now that you're not near death and can enjoy it."

I accepted the glass and sniffed it. "Red wine, or demon wine?"

"Regular, human red." He clinked his glass against mine. "You'll spot the difference when you see demon wine. It's unmistakable."

Letting that ominous-sounding information go, I took a sip. It had a smooth, sweet undertone to it. I drank more. "So. Human food and wine. Are you supposed to be lowering my inhibitions and gaining my

trust? I imagine you're going to pretend to be drunk, offer some innocuous information predetermined by your prince, and see what secrets I spill in return."

"Are you always this cynical?"

"If there's one thing I've learned recently, it's to question anyone connected to the demon realm. Everyone has their own agenda. Their own game. If I ask enough questions, eventually I'll catch someone in their well-constructed lie. Though, according to the princes, they are incapable of directly telling an untruth. Another fabrication, I'm sure. Or maybe that's why you're here. *You* can lie for Wrath."

I plucked an olive from a tiny dish and popped it into my mouth. The briny flavor was a nice counterpoint to the wine. I sampled a bit of cheese and meat and bread. Anir watched me, his expression contemplative, if not a bit sad.

"I just haven't quite worked out what else he could possibly want from me now. He won."

Anir swirled his wine. "What, exactly, do you think he's won?"

"His freedom. His grand deception. Making me look like a fool for trusting him when he said we'd work together." I finished off my glass and poured a second. Before I took a sip, I ate another olive. "Why don't you explain demon politics to me so I can figure out what else he's gained by signing my soul to the devil."

"Is that what he told you?"

"I…" I thought back to the night we'd kissed, when I'd repeated what I'd heard from Envy. I couldn't recall what Wrath said, exactly, but… "He didn't deny the accusation. If he wasn't worried about being caught in a lie, why wouldn't he tell me otherwise?"

"Acta non verba." Anir grinned. "He lives by that principle."

Actions, not words. I clamped my mouth shut. Wrath brought me to the underworld. He came bearing a contract with Pride. It was a fairly large, undeniable action. He didn't have to say a thing. I got his message, and it was as loud and clear as a cloudless summer sky. Wrath had no qualms about using me for his gain. He'd once said he'd lie, cheat, steal, or murder to procure his freedom. I was lucky he'd only deceived me, though that was hardly a consolation.

"What do you know about Pride's consort? How was she murdered?"

"Interesting, if not an aggressive, subject change." Anir put some cheese on a slice of crostini and topped it off with prosciutto. "My unsolicited advice? Take a subtler approach with information-gathering here. The royal Houses are ancient and antiquated in their ways. They won't give you anything if you demand it or openly ask about it. It's considered rude and uncouth. Plus, they do not believe in giving without gain. You ask for something, you better be prepared to

pay a price."

I worried my lower lip between my teeth, thinking. Anir offered truth and advice freely. If I had to gamble on any friendship here, perhaps I should bet on him, regardless of his close connection with Wrath. I set my glass down.

"I'm not sure how to bring that up in a more casual or innocuous way. If I'm being truthful, I'm a bit overwhelmed."

"Understandable. A lot is changing and quickly. I imagine it's hard… processing so many emotions."

It was an odd turn of phrase. "You must have traveled through the Sin Corridor. I doubt you have to stretch your imagination very far to understand how it feels."

"True enough." He took a sip of his wine, gaze searching. "You'll need to gain the princes' trust, become their friend. Let them conspire with you, seek you out. If you play into their egos and the sins they represent, they'll offer up bits of useful information. Always be prepared to give up a secret or make a bargain. Pick things you won't mind sharing or having used against you. Define the terms before you agree, or else they'll bend things to their advantage."

I exhaled. "I was hoping for a faster solution."

"You're involved in something spanning decades and realms. There is no such thing as fast or easy. This goes beyond the bloodshed on your isle. But if you start there, perhaps you'll learn more. Narrow your list. Concentrate on who you think has the answers you seek. What information do you need most? What will be the most beneficial to your overall goal?"

"I don't have an agenda. I'm simply curious. If Pride's wife was murdered, and each of his next potential brides were, too, I want to avoid that same fate."

"If that was completely true, you wouldn't have come here at all."

"I'm here to ensure demons don't slip through the gates. I'm here to protect my family."

Anir didn't respond. We both knew that was only partially true. If I wanted answers about Pride's consort and details of her life and death, I needed to go to Pride. Except he was locked in a childish battle of male ego with Wrath and I needed an invitation.

I hadn't gotten anywhere with Envy, and his role in my sister's murder was still murky. Discovering who killed the first consort might be the most helpful route to take with solving *my* mystery. And I hadn't fully lied; knowing what happened to her *would* help me. It sounded like Anir knew more, but the way he'd phrased his statement brooked no room for entertaining that line of questioning. At least it was a subtle clue.

"Why did you choose to become a member of House Wrath?"

Anir didn't answer right away, and I immediately regretted asking something that was likely personal. He heaved a sigh.

"After my parents were murdered, anger and wrath were my biggest comforts. He sensed that, saw the path I was on, and offered me a productive outlet for that fury."

We weren't dissimilar. "How long have you been here?"

"Hmm. Time is peculiar here. A mortal hour might be a week. A month, a decade. All I know is it's been a while." Anir took a generous pull of his wine, eyes narrowed. "Your turn. What did you do to him?"

"I'm not sure I follow your meaning. What happened?"

"He went out and brought down an entire mountain on the western edge of the Undying Lands. We've got letters pouring in from House Lust and House Gluttony so far. They believe the end days are here and want to know if we're preparing for war."

"Why is it whenever a man throws a tantrum a woman is blamed for his poor behavior? If Wrath acted like an idiot, he accomplished that all on his own. I don't see why his temper is so shocking. He *is* the living embodiment of wrath. I'm sure you've seen him angry."

Anir smirked over his glass. "You're certain he was mad?"

"What else would he be?"

"Pick another emotion."

"Does being a prideful bastard count?"

"Your room, your rules. But I don't think he was angry or prideful." His dark eyes twinkled. "You know, in all the years I've known him, he's never personally escorted anyone into the City of Ice." Whatever question he saw in my face, he clarified, "It's what House Wrath is known as within the Seven Circles. The more powerful the House, the colder the circle."

Explained all the frosty glass and crystal décor in my bathing chamber.

"I wouldn't read too much into his supposed good deed. He had to escort me because of the contract. He needed my soul to settle his debt."

"That was accomplished the instant you crossed into the underworld. He could have left you alone in the Sin Corridor. He *should* have." Anir abruptly stood and headed for the door in the antechamber. He tapped his fingers on its frame and glanced back at me. "He's on the seventh-floor balcony now. In case you wanted to fight some more. I think it's good for him. Being challenged. You certainly get under his skin."

Like a poisoned splinter straight to the heart, no doubt. It was tempting, and I might have done just that, if I hadn't noticed an object placed on the edge of the bed.

Something that didn't belong and hadn't been there a few

moments before. I bid Anir good night and pressed myself against the closed door, silently counting the increased beats of my heart as I stared into the other room.

Fear. This realm thrived on it. And I would deprive it in every way I could.

I exhaled slowly, counted to ten.

Then I stood up straight, pulled my shoulders back, and marched over to the human skull.

SIX

"Angelus mortis lives," the skull crooned the moment I got within inches of it, its voice eerily similar to my twin's. Fine hairs rose along my arms. It was as if Vittoria crossed the barrier between life and death to send a message, except it was slightly off, wrong. *"Fury. Almost free. Maiden, Mother, Crone. Past, present, future, find."*

"Vittoria?" The fleshless jaws went slack, and whatever dark magic had fueled the skull vanished. I swallowed hard, unable to take my eyes off the cursed messenger. "Goddess above."

How someone had snuck an enchanted skull in without Anir or me noticing was almost as troubling as the magic used to power it. I'd never heard of a spell that commanded the bones of the dead. Sure, there was necromancy, but that's *not* what powered the skull. This wasn't even *il Proibito*. This was something other, something more terrifying than the Forbidden.

I left the skull where it was, plopped onto the glass chair, and took a healthy sip of wine, my mind racing. I thought about Nonna's lessons on dark magic, specifically spells using objects touched by death—how both should be avoided at all costs. Never, not once, did she ever tell us a story about a witch who could manipulate life into something long dead. If that was even what happened. It had to be demon magic. Which meant the sender was likely a prince of Hell.

The question was which one and why.

I replayed the message in my mind. The angel of death lives. *Fury. Almost free. Maiden, Mother, Crone. Past, present, future, find.*

To simplify, and to keep from panicking over the macabre messenger, I decided to pick it apart line by line, starting with the angel of death.

Claudia, my best friend and a witch whose family openly practiced the dark arts, used a black mirror and human bones in her last scrying session, and her mind had been taunted with the voices of the dead. She'd also mentioned something about the angel of death.

I did not believe in coincidences.

I got up and paced around the room, struggling to recall more from Claudia's scrying. That night was filled with terror, and the details were fuzzy. I'd found her on her knees in the courtyard outside the monastery, her nails broken to the quick, as she recited nonsensical messages from the cursed and the damned. She told me to run, but there was no way I'd leave her with the superstitious holy brotherhood. She'd said something about a cunning thief stealing the stars and drinking them dry. That he was coming and going.

That it should have been impossible…

I knew at least four demon princes who were roaming Sicily at that time. Wrath, Envy, Greed, and Lust. One of them had to be the angel of death. Maybe not in the literal sense, but it could certainly be a nickname. I stopped dead in my tracks, heart pounding.

Only one demon fit that description. I'd even called him Samael one night—the angel of death and prince of Rome—thinking it a clever description of him. He'd given me a bemused look, right before he'd warned me to never call him that again. Wrath.

He didn't hide the fact that he was the general of war. He excelled in violence. If he was Death, maybe he hadn't been *chosen* to solve the murders; perhaps he was furious someone sullied his title and involved him without the devil's consent. That would explain why Pride didn't want to invite him into his circle. The devil was punishing Wrath for disobedience.

Which, if true, threw into question every last bit of information I'd wrung from him. If Wrath omitted basic truths about his involvement, there was no telling how far his deception stretched.

I rubbed my temples. Wrath was my top suspect for both the angel of death and the fury portion of the riddle. Next came the Maiden, Mother, and Crone. That part was harder to connect to the murders. According to our history, the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone were three goddesses who ruled the heavens, the earth, and the underworld.

Old witch legends claimed they'd given birth to the goddesses we prayed to, and one of them—the goddess of the heavens and sun—was La Prima Strega's mother. The Maiden, Mother, and Crone were to our goddesses what Titans were to the gods in mortal mythologies.

If she was real and not a fable, the goddess of the underworld—or any of the goddesses birthed to her realm—would likely possess the kind of magic that animated bones, but *why* she'd send a cryptic message to me remained a mystery. Goddesses had never shown interest in involving themselves with witches before. I doubted they'd start now.

However the Maiden, Mother, and Crone fit, it wasn't through a legend I'd been taught. It wasn't a stretch to think demons had their own stories and histories about them.

Answers weren't going to present themselves by staying locked away in my chamber.

I removed a scarf from the wardrobe and picked up the skull, careful to avoid touching it without cloth. If Vittoria were here, she'd have plucked it up and danced it across the room without a moment's hesitation, fueling Nonna's worry about her affinity with the dead. A smile almost tugged at my lips before I banished it. I glanced around, searching for a hiding place, then knelt down and shoved the skull deep inside the wardrobe and shut its doors.

Situation resolved, I dusted off my hands and went to search House Wrath.

I stopped counting how many stone staircases I'd descended somewhere around a dozen. Each magnificent landing ended on a floor that spanned what seemed like thousands of meters. Which must have been deception magic—Wrath's castle couldn't be *that* large.

On the next landing, I stopped to look out a trio of arched windows. A large body of merlot-colored water pooled at the bottom of a valley, smoke rising in lazy tendrils from its surface. A branch from a nearby tree fell into the water, immediately bursting into flames.

I made a mental note to never get near the cursed lake unless I wanted my flesh to burn off my bones. I left the windows and wandered down the corridor.

The castle was mostly built from pale stone, similar to limestone, and there were some wings that had been richly fitted with large, colorful tapestries. This particular wing had an image of angels in battle with monstrous creatures.

It reminded me of art created during the Renaissance; the colors deep and dark against the pale walls and columns. Doors carved from bone opened to ballrooms, and unused bedrooms, and sitting rooms. I

stopped outside a towering set of double doors and traced the delicate carving. A tangle of vines with flowers and stars crawled up the edges and top, while the same vines twisted into roots that plunged into the bowels of the earth at the bottom of the doors.

Skeletons and skulls and things left to rot and ruin adorned the lower portion.

I pushed the door open and swallowed a gasp. Inside was a library unlike anything I'd ever dreamed of. Excitement rushed through me as I stepped into the room and stared at rows and rows of glass shelves. They went on for an eternity.

My face split into a wide grin. The goddesses must have been smiling down on me; this was the *perfect* place to research magic and myths. I marveled at the jewel-toned vellum spines of thousands of books. Someone had arranged them by color, their bindings ranging from the most brilliant shades of yellow to the palest butter creams and pure snow-whites. Reds, purples, blues, greens, and oranges; it was a rainbow of beauty set against a backdrop of ice.

I couldn't picture Wrath being serene enough for a quiet night of reading, and if he did, I never would have guessed he'd do it with a riot of color surrounding him. Maybe ebonies and gold—dark gleaming wood and leather. Masculine elegance at its finest. This was…

"Haven. Close to Heaven but not quite as boring."

I spun around, a hand pressed against my pounding heart. "Sneaking up on people is rude. I thought demon princes were supposed to have impeccable manners."

"We do. Mostly." Wrath's gaze traveled unapologetically over my strapless gown, and I became excruciatingly aware of each place the silky fabric slid across my skin. I suspected his perusal had more to do with ensuring I'd dressed the part of future queen, and would not embarrass myself in front of any members of his court, rather than anything else. "My personal library is one level down."

"Let me guess… Hell? Blacks, leathers, gold?"

"Lots of fire and chains and torture devices, too." His smile was a quick flash of teeth. Dangerous, disarming. A different sort of weapon he'd honed to perfection. Possibly the most perilous in his arsenal. Especially here. "When you're feeling brave enough, I'll show you."

My stomach did a tiny flip at the thought of chains and dark spaces and Wrath. "Naming your libraries Haven and Hell is dramatic enough to suit you, I suppose." I walked down an aisle filled with various shades of blue books, the demon trailing me. I needed to stop looking at that smile, or this realm would pounce. "Have you heard from any of your brothers?"

"Envy, Lust, and Greed have all shown interest in hosting you. We

received their House cards earlier." His tone remained light, almost suspiciously so. "They've specifically requested your presence at their Feast of the Wolf celebrations. I imagine Sloth and Gluttony will eventually stop overindulging enough to send invitations, too."

Lupercalia was a pre-Roman holiday that roughly meant "Feast of the Wolf," where humans sacrificed goats, then anointed foreheads of the wealthy in the spilled blood. Some cut pieces from the creatures then ran naked through the streets, smacking bystanders with the flesh. If the demon celebration was anything similar, I'd prefer to avoid it.

Without turning around, I said, "Will you be hosting a feast?"

He appeared before me, leaning casually against a shelf. Supernatural speed on full display. I couldn't help but run my gaze over him. His suit was the deep charcoal of shadows. It made me think of nighttime and silken sheets and secret rendezvous and things I shouldn't.

"No. I'm waiting to see what Pride does."

"Has he sent a summons yet?"

"No."

"Why are you waiting to see what he does?"

"It's one of the few times all seven princes are invited into the same royal domain. Then it's three days of pomp and circumstance—dinners, hunts, a masked ball, then the feast. We decide where it will be held based on two factors. Where the guest of honor chooses to go, and which prince with the highest rank decides to host."

"Aren't you all of equal power?" Wrath shook his head, not elaborating. I locked my frustration away. "What if the guest of honor doesn't pick the prince with the highest rank?"

"They always do. And if they don't, they're strongly encouraged to from whichever House they're from. Refusing is a grave insult and has caused more than a few bloodbaths over the centuries." For a fleeting moment, he looked hungry for battle. Then his expression turned contemplative. "Princes all suffer from surges of other sins, it seems."

Our gazes locked. I understood what he really meant. Wrath was apologizing for our argument earlier. This information was an olive branch laid at my feet. I could kick it aside and continue our fight, or I could accept it and move on.

I resumed my slow procession down the aisle, looking for a particular subject matter, but projecting nonchalance to avoid suspicion.

"Why do you celebrate a pre-Roman tradition, anyway?"

"How very mortal of you to believe *they* weren't inspired by *our* rites and rituals," he scoffed. "They didn't even have the decency to keep the correct dates or practices."

I stopped my perusal of titles and studied him closely. “Why are you really telling me this? Do each of the princes of Hell turn into giant wolves and howl under a full moon? Perhaps I should be worried about you panting at my bedroom door before the feast.”

“We do wear wolf masks, but there will be no panting from me. Unless you ask nicely.”

I swallowed hard, forcing my thoughts away from where this realm—and this troublesome prince—was tugging them. “You didn’t answer my first question. Why are you telling me about this now?”

“You’ve been nominated for the guest of honor.” The remaining humor left his face. “The vote takes place next month. I have little doubt you’re going to be chosen. Your arrival is the talk of the Seven Circles. I doubt anyone else will be half as intriguing this Blood Season.”

Wonderful. “Will I be forced to kill the goat?”

Wrath held my gaze. “There is no goat, Emilia.”

The way he said it made my knees buckle. “Will I *be* the sacrifice?”

“No.” Relief flooded through me at that one beautiful little word. “Your biggest fear or a secret of your heart will be wrenched from you as the sacrifice.”

“No.” My voice was whisper soft, trembling. I hated it.

“Yes.” His voice was hard, edged. I hated it, too. “And it will happen in front of every prince of Hell and all of our subjects in attendance. Fear is power here. The larger your fear, the greater the power you give us. You would be far better off sacrificing your life. If they take your biggest fear, I promise you will wish for something as swift and final as a mortal’s death.”

SEVEN

"No. I refuse." My voice was steel this time. "You said I *always* have a choice."

Frost coated his expression. "From recent actions, I was starting to think you'd forgotten that conversation."

"You want to discuss what happened back in the cave *now*?"

"Not particularly, no."

"We're going to have to eventually—we might as well do it now."

"Fine." He crossed his arms against his chest. "You may start by explaining your decision."

He spoke as if I actually had a choice, his voice tinged with barely suppressed anger. I was so surprised, I stepped back, examining him carefully. A muscle flickered in his jaw and his gaze was hard enough to make diamonds jealous. Wrath wasn't just angry, he was incensed. I could practically feel the heat of his fury radiating in the space between us.

Clarity washed over me. "You wanted me to refuse Pride."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." For once, his emotions were written all over his face. My shock quickly gave way to annoyance. If only he'd confided in me that night, things would be so much different. We could have come up with a new plan. Together. Anger unleashed my tongue. "Tell me why. I demand to know why you wanted me to refuse him."

"Stop pushing, Emilia. This conversation is done."

"No, it's really not. Will he hurt me?"

The shelves nearest us vibrated. "Do you believe I'd permit that?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "I don't know what's real or fantasy or part of your newest scheme. You brought me here, to this realm, to marry your brother."

"Do not confuse your choices with my actions."

As if I had any good options. "Was I supposed to stay home and watch demons tear my world apart? Murder or torture my family and friends and continue ripping hearts from witches? You keep alluding to the fact I had a choice, but I didn't."

"You *always* have choice."

"Not with the clock ticking down and the gates cracking. Signing the contract with Pride was my best option to stop the carnage. I made a decision with the information I had. If I made a mistake or if you're not pleased—for whatever reason—maybe you should have actually talked to me that night. Instead you stood there, cold and furious, and didn't say a word!"

His gold eyes narrowed. "Has it occurred to you that I *couldn't*?"

"Couldn't what? Talk to me?"

"Interfere."

"Through magic or a demon edict?" I searched his face, but he'd replaced his annoyance with that emotionless mask he wore so well. I reined in my temper, not wanting to fight. "I thought the devil was the only one who's cursed. Are you implying that's not true? Is there something I need to know about you?"

His hands flexed at his sides. He looked like he wanted to rush away to a sparring ring and work off his frustration. "Perhaps that's a question you should have asked your mortal family. They certainly seem to have selective gaps in their storytelling. Have you ever wondered why, *witch*?"

"How dare you speak of my family—"

He magicked himself away in a cloud of smoke, leaving me reeling with confusion. My family wasn't keeping any secrets. Nonna shared stories all of our lives about the Wicked and their lies and manipulations. She warned against the dark arts and the payments demanded from that type of magic. All of that was true.

I paced the aisle of books. Wrath was wrong or he was lying or omitting more truth. Nonna told us about the blood debt between the First Witch—La Prima Strega—and the devil, about how he demanded a blood sacrifice for something that was stolen from him.

The Horn of Hades, the two amulets my sister and I had been given at birth, turned out to be those objects. His horns. Wrath collected them the night he brought me Pride's contract. He'd used them to lock the gates of Hell, just as he'd promised, then hidden

them from me.

Fury rose in me but quickly gave way to confusion. Nonna had known about Star Witches and the devil's horns and she *hadn't* told us.

I'd found out about the horns through my sister's diary, and Star Witches from Wrath and Envy, though that wasn't the name they'd used. Envy had called me a Shadow Witch.

Nonna didn't admit to knowing about either right away when I'd confronted her.

Which made me wonder how many other things she hadn't been forthcoming about. We learned the bare minimum of earth magic; how to cast simple spells aided with herbs and objects of intent. Charms of protection. Sleep spells and harmless spells that manipulated the dew on a glass to slide it across a surface. Things that hardly required much skill.

A Latin phrase or word here, a pinch of this there and a spell was cast, aided with our magical blood. What else was there about the curse that I didn't know?

Or our magic, for that matter.

I walked in an agitated circle. Now that I was questioning things, I couldn't stop finding more gaps in our lives. Nonna spent so much time teaching us the ways of demons, only to stunt our education regarding our own abilities. I couldn't help but wonder if there was a reason for that. Nonna was much too smart to have forgotten valuable lessons.

Surely offensive magic was just as important as our defensive spells of protection. But she never taught us those kinds of bold spells. In fact, she seemed determined to keep that magic from us at all costs. Was there something dangerous about us using it?

Vittoria and I were told to listen to her, to obey and follow the rules or suffer the consequences. I'd never wanted to anger Nonna or cause harm.

But Vittoria always pushed the limits, unafraid of the consequences.

Wrath's sharp comment carved deep, infected me. Like it was designed to do. His weaponry was not limited to steel or bullets or sly grins and heady kisses. His words were just as deadly when aimed and fired at a target. I couldn't escape the gnawing feeling that maybe he was right.

There were holes in my education I couldn't ignore.

Some spells came easily as if through body memory. Some I had to learn and almost always forgot. I couldn't recall where or how I'd discovered the truth spell, only that one day I wanted truth and out came a spell that stole away free will. Nonna had been furious when I told her. Instead of being rewarded for using that level of power, I was

punished.

I marched to the end of the shelves and found a plush, oversized chair to sit in. A thought I couldn't run from followed me there. Maybe Wrath wasn't referring only to Nonna.

My sister had found the first book of spells, used demon magic to lock her diary, and had brought Greed and the shape-shifters together for reasons I didn't fully understand, given the fact shape-shifters and demons were natural enemies.

I stared down at my finger, startled to see I still wore the olive branch ring Wrath had given me. I absently twisted the gold band around my finger. I wondered what else Vittoria might have discovered before her death. Was it the full truth of the devil's curse and the blood debt? Maybe that knowledge, more than anything else, was why she'd really been killed.

Something buried deep in my memory stirred, then floated away. A wisp of smoke I couldn't grasp. I had the strangest impression that maybe the devil hadn't been cursed at all.

If that was true… then perhaps the witch murders had nothing to do with his finding a bride, and everything I thought I knew had been fabricated from deception. Nonna. Vittoria. The seven princes of Hell. At least one of them had been lying.

And I was more determined than ever to find out why.

It took a few frustrating hours, but I finally found what I'd been searching for. I pulled a grimoire on beginning magic and plopped into a chair near a darkened corner. I swept my gaze around the space; there were no sounds or indications anyone else was in the library. Not that it would seem odd if a witch was studying magic. Still, I didn't want anyone to realize how much my education lacked. I cracked the worn leather spine and began reading.

According to the witch who authored this book, our magic was similar to a muscle that needed to be exercised. If ignored too long, it atrophied. She also described it as "Source": a place within us readily available to draw from, like an endless well in our core.

The wise Spinners of Fate say our power is a gift bestowed from the goddesses and therefore has a tendency to mimic their abilities to some degree. Some bloodlines will notice an affinity for certain spells, especially those using the four elements. It is an indication of which goddess a witch should pray to in order to enhance that magic. The lesser spoken of fifth element, aether, is thought to be the rarest, but that may not be true in this

context.

I stopped reading and allowed that information to sink in. And with it another emotion I'd rather not examine closely. Not quite suspicion, nor anger, but something related to both. Nonna had never explained where our power came from or how it worked. It was possible my grandmother didn't exactly know, but I couldn't quite believe that.

This was also the first time I'd ever heard of the Spinners of Fate and praying to one goddess. We'd always been taught to pray to them all. I searched my memory for any altars Nonna made for any one goddess and could think of none. Perhaps our magic wasn't closely aligned with any of the elements.

I leafed through the grimoire, searching for more information on the Spinners of Fate, but there were no further mentions. I flipped back to the beginning, concentrating on Source.

Anger at Nonna and my own lack of questioning our education distracted me.

"Focus."

Skeptical of my abilities, I closed my eyes, cleared my thoughts, and tried to sense that inner source of power. At first there wasn't anything unusual, then the world quickly faded around me. It grew darker in my mind. I knew nothing, was nothing. I became nothing.

It was almost a void inside me, yawning open into endless darkness. I had the strangest impression that it had been waiting for me to tap into it, and once I acknowledged its existence, I was immediately drawn in. Now I felt *everything*. I tunneled down, down, down into my very center, near my wildly beating heart, and paused. My magic slumbered here. I wasn't sure how I knew, but I did. I brought my consciousness around the magic, trying to get a better sense of it. Something ancient and powerful and spitting mad cracked an eye, furious at being awoken.

I withdrew from that place with a gasp.

"Holy goddess above… what *was* that?"

I flipped through the pages of the grimoire, but there was no mention of a power like the one I'd just experienced. It certainly didn't fit into earth, air, fire, water, or aether. It was massive, all-knowing, powerful in a way that worried me. Its rage burned with an intensity that obliterated reason. If I could summon that force at will… I could destroy this realm.

Not that I wanted to do that. I only wanted vengeance against my twin's murderer. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, ready to try again.

"Oh, pardon me."

I glanced up from my spell work, my education abandoned, and

closed the grimoire with a loud clap. A young woman—with curly jet-black hair, rich sepia-colored eyes, and brown skin—gave me a polite curtsy. Little animal skulls were fastened in her long hair, similar to the way I pinned flowers in mine. A deep russet-copper dress hugged each of her generous curves. She held a book on arboriculture, a surprising but interesting choice.

"You must be Emilia. The whole court is vastly intrigued by you. I'm Fauna."

I gave her a tentative smile. I'd been counting on the fact that gossip would be as widely used here as it had been in the marketplace back home. "What kind of nasty rumors are circulating?"

"The usual. Your hair is made of serpents, your tongue of fire, and when you're angry, you spit flames like the mighty ice dragons of Merciless Reach." She grinned at my look of surprise. "Teasing. They're too smart to start rumors while Prince Wrath is in residence. As his personal guest, you're off limits. He's made that very clear. Lord or lady of the Royal Demon Court, if your name is on anyone's tongue, he will rip it out."

"More like he'll glare at them until they wither and die if they impede his mission."

She gave me a curious look. "Actually, he was quite literal in his threat. Lord Makaden's lucky he escaped with his intact. The prince promised the next time he speaks ill of you, his tongue will be spiked outside the throne room and stay there until it rots. Makaden's prominent standing in the court is likely the only reason he's not maimed now."

I had to mentally remind myself to keep breathing as that image took shape. "Truly? Wrath threatened to rip out someone's tongue?"

"It's no idle threat. It was a warning to be heeded. His highness is not merciful with those who challenge him. This morning he brought a mountain down on Domitius, his lieutenant general." Fauna's smile faded. "They're still searching through the rubble."

I was at a loss for words. Anir only said he'd taken a mountain down. He didn't mention anyone being crushed by it. Wrath was a prince of Hell. A general of war. One of the feared and mighty Seven. This news shouldn't be surprising. I'd seen his violence before.

Still, it served as a reminder of who I was dealing with and where I was. I would need to play my game expertly when I went to any other courts.

The fact that Wrath had harmed a high-ranking officer shouldn't have come as a shock. He'd probably taken his dark mood out on him after our fight this morning. If that was what he did after a small argument, I worried about who might feel his legendary wrath after our latest disagreement. Guilt sank its claws in deep, though logically

I knew I had nothing to feel guilty about. He was solely responsible for his actions.

"Do you know why Wrath attacked him?"

"I believe Domitius suggested serving your still-beating heart to the soldiers. Though others claim he made lewd comments about your physical attributes. Something about tasting you to see if you were as sweet as your 'ripe bosom' suggested."

"And the other? What did he say?"

"Lord Makaden inquired about his highness having any other rules governing tongues and how they applied to you." She hesitated. "Neither one of them are considered to be very… humorous. His majesty was right to act swiftly. One rotten demonberry spoils the whole bushel."

Charming. It was a delicate way of saying the demons would have acted on their statements. Or at least tried to. I might not be well versed with weapons or combat, but I did have some skill with a blade, thanks to time spent in the kitchen, breaking down carcasses. I knew vital areas to aim for and wouldn't hesitate to stick someone who meant me harm.

I'd request a weapon the next time I saw Wrath. Surely he would grant me some means of protection. I did not want to rely on him or anyone else for my safety.

"Were either of them your lover?"

"Devils, no." Fauna snorted. "You'll meet the object of my pining soon enough. Tomorrow night, in fact."

Suspicion pooled inside me along with dread. "What's happening tomorrow?"

"Nothing too scandalous or terrifying. Only dinner with the most elite House Wrath members." Her smile was full and bright. "Don't be worried. Prince Wrath forbade 'guttings at gatherings' at least a century ago. Now the only blades we arm ourselves with are our sharp glares. We stare daggers over our wine and dream of sticking our enemies in flesh. Consider it practice for the upcoming feast."

"I heard a fear is torn from the guest of honor. Can someone offer to stand in?" If so, I'd bargain with Wrath or the devil himself if I had to. "Any upper nobility, perhaps?"

"Even if it were allowed, which it may well be, no one would volunteer." Fauna gave me a pitying look. "Definitely no prince of this realm. It would give the other royals too much power." She held her book tightly. "You're staying in the Crystal Wing, correct?"

"Maybe?" I lifted a shoulder. "There's a lot of crystal in my chamber."

"Wonderful. I'll meet you before dinner and escort you down."

Before I could agree or ask questions, she hurried out of the

library.

I shook my head. My first day in House Wrath had been a disaster. Arriving with hypothermia, an enchanted skull, arguments with the prince, secrets my family might be keeping about my magic, a maimed member of Wrath's army, and the new threat of the Feast of the Wolf looming above it all.

The last thing in the world I wanted was to offer up my worst fear to a realm that would torture me with it. But perhaps if I learned how to harness my power, I could solve Vittoria's murder and be back home in the mortal world well before that happened.

I collected the grimoire, pushed myself up, and retreated back to my rooms, needing to prepare for tomorrow. Given the information regarding the felled mountain, I had little doubt dinner would be its own sort of wicked battle. One I'd be lucky to escape from unscathed.

I didn't end up back in the Crystal Wing. Curiosity got the better of me and I decided to investigate Wrath's version of Hell. Know thy enemy… and his reading habits.

I found a circular staircase near the back of the rainbow library and carefully descended into the darkness yawning below. My initial guess of ebony, gold, and leather wasn't that far off from the reality of his personal library. Dark, butter-soft worn leather chairs were placed before a fireplace that took up a wall made of stacked stone. I could easily stand upright in the opening and stretch my arms above my head and still not reach the top of it. Several rugs in various shades of charcoal and black with gold thread details were tastefully laid around the room.

Here, the shelves were obsidian gemstone, the books all bound with dark shades of leather. A circular chandelier with thin iron arms hung from exposed beams and cast an enticing glow over the room. It was the perfect place to curl up and read in front of a crackling fire. There was even a plush throw blanket tossed casually across the back of a reading chair.

In an alcove off the main reading space a set of manacled chains hung from the wall. Wrath hadn't been teasing. My mouth went dry and I quickly averted my gaze.

Torture wasn't the first thing that had sprung to mind. And I did *not* want this realm working its devious magic on any more fleeting emotions. I moved through the rest of the space, devouring as much as I could.

Books and journals on war strategy, history—both demon and human—witch rituals, grimoires, and even a few handwritten notes were placed in neat stacks on a large, imposing desk. Latin and a language I couldn't read. Nothing incriminating or useful. Nothing of goddesses or their magic, or demon fables about the Maiden, Mother, or Crone. No spells on reanimating skulls or other bones.

Just pens and pots of ink. A rough stone I imagined was used to sharpen a blade.

On a shelf behind the desk were seven volumes of journals dedicated to each demon House. Eight journals, actually, if the pattern in the dust was any indication. Perhaps one House was so prolific it had taken more than one book to get all the information down. Whatever the case, the text was missing now.

Apparently, the titles were the only things written in Latin. I thumbed through a few but couldn't read the language within. Frustration built behind my breastbone as I shoved the journals back in place. Nothing was ever easy.

A decanter partially filled with lavender liquid and a matching crystal glass caught my attention. Curious about what Wrath indulged in, I splashed some liquor into the glass and sniffed. Notes of citrus and botanicals blended together. I took a careful sip and hissed through my teeth at the burn. It was strong. Almost like human brandy but with a sweeter, vanilla undertone. If I smoothed it out with some cream and ice it would be divine.

And might help get me through tomorrow evening. I'd send for a glass before the meal.

I set the liquor aside and sat at the desk, rattling the drawers. Locked, naturally. Tucked below a copper serpent sculpture I assumed was used as a paperweight, was an envelope with elegant script. Not feeling guilty at all, I read the message.

Brother,
They have been found.
VIII

G

I read it over again, not that it helped decipher the single line. I imagined the *G* stood for Greed. But it could also be Gluttony. *They have been found. VIII.* Envy and Greed had both been after the Horn of

Hades, but Wrath never showed much interest in the amulets. Not to mention, he was now in possession of them until Pride allowed us into his territory.

"So what, then, were you searching for, dearest, secretive, Wrath?"

I picked up the serpent paperweight and rolled it between my palms. "Ouch."

I turned it over; little sharp ridges in a geometric design poked out from the bottom. It was a wax seal, not a paperweight. Or maybe it was both. I set it aside and scanned the note again. Something stood out this time. It didn't address anyone by name. Which meant there was no way to know if Wrath was the intended recipient, or if he'd intercepted it.

Maybe this message was meant for the devil—to let him know his horns had been recovered. Maybe the *G* symbolized Wrath's true name and he was the one sending out the correspondence. Or maybe there wasn't anything important about this at all and I was so desperate to find clues, I was inventing them.

It was also missing a date, so there was no way to know if this was recent news or ancient history. Unless that was what the *VIII* portion meant. I had no idea how the demons tabulated time. It was the late nineteenth century on earth, but it could be eight eons here. Or maybe it was indicating the missing eighth journal. I could spend eternity guessing.

I put the useless note away, commandeered a pot of ink, pen, and some parchment, retrieved the grimoire on beginning magic, and headed back to my chamber, more frustrated and lost than I'd felt before. Tomorrow, I had to hope, would bring some clarity, even if it came in the form of watching how the demons interacted and learning how they moved through court.

Given my working-class standing, I had not associated with wealthy circles back home, so tomorrow would be a test of how well I could blend in. My path to vengeance would be a slow burn, not a raging inferno. By the time I invaded House Pride, I would be well versed in proper deception.

When the demon responsible for Vittoria's death finally felt the flames of my fury, I'd hopefully have burned his House of Sin to ash.

EIGHT

Drying blood or an aged merlot, reduced in a saucepan and drizzled over a cut of peppercorn-encrusted meat. I twisted from side to side in the gilded floor-length mirror. I couldn't decide which description better captured the unique color of the gown I now wore. Nonna would call it a blood-drenched omen and offer up prayers to the goddesses.

I quite liked it.

I'd obviously never attended a royal demon dinner party before, and the note that arrived early this morning in Wrath's elegant slashes indicated I should wear something fierce and formal. This gown was both. A stiff corset bodice plunged into a deep *V* between my breasts, showing off my bronzed skin. Fine black snakeskin was embroidered onto the daring top, while the skirts remained that solid shade of dark wine. Demon finery in all its gothic glory.

Since this gown was also strapless, my shimmering tattoo was on full display. I decided to forgo gloves to show it off. I wore no jewels except for the ring Wrath had gifted me. It would make an interesting topic of discussion, no doubt.

And would hopefully serve its purpose well.

I missed the silver *cornicello* I'd worn my whole life, but had to accept my amulet was gone for good. I moved into the bathing chamber and toyed with my unbound hair. Yesterday Fauna's style had been loose and wild and lovely, so I fashioned mine in a similar manner to avoid any missteps in attire. Long dark waves cascaded

down my back, and the shorter pieces framing my face fell forward as I pretended to converse with diners on either side of me.

Which wouldn't do. I didn't want to hide behind anything this evening. The lords and ladies of Hell would gaze upon me without any barriers.

No matter how afraid or nervous I was, I refused to look it.

In a vanity drawer, I discovered little bird skull clips and pulled the top portion of my hair back. I placed the bones prettily about my crown like a diadem of death and added flowers between the macabre. There. Now I looked like a princess of Hell, if not its future queen.

Although, with the bones in my hair and the familiar glint of barely leashed anger shining in my eyes, I supposed I could also pass for the goddess of death and fury.

I walked back into my bedchamber and halted halfway through it. Placed on the glass table—next to the bottle of wine left over from Anir's visit the night before—was another skull.

"Blood and bones." Almost literally.

I drew in a deep breath and moved close enough for it to deliver its message. Almost immediately, it spoke in that same, Vittoria-like voice that made goose bumps rise across my body. *"Seven stars, seven sins. As above, so below."*

"Goddess above. What does that even *mean*?"

I didn't expect a response and wasn't too disappointed when none came. I heaved a sigh. I hated riddles. Confusing, worthless things. I pulled out the inkpot, pen, and parchment I'd taken from Wrath's library and scribbled notes.

If one of Wrath's brothers was taking the time to send messages via possessed skulls, it definitely meant something. Unless one of the seven princes was simply toying with me out of boredom. Which I doubted but wouldn't rule out. Perhaps they were petty enough to do it.

~ Enchanted skulls ~

Skull one: Angelus mortis lives. Fury. Almost free. Maiden, Mother, Crone. Past, present, future, find.

Skull two: Seven stars, seven sins. As above, so below.

The seven sins were the easiest to decipher; clearly it meant the princes of Hell. *As above, so below* was part of the prophecy—which was less clear. No one seemed entirely sure what it meant. Nonna said it related to Vittoria and me, that we were supposed to bring peace to

both realms through great sacrifice. But even she didn't have all of the answers. At least that was what she claimed. Who knew the truth anymore? The rest… the rest would take some research.

I started a new line in my notes, determined to have each theory clearly defined so I could cross it off or add to it over time. Having something written always helped me to truly *see*.

Plus, it was what detectives in novels did, and they always solved their mystery by the end of the book. I was no expert, but I'd try my best. I jotted down as much information as I could recall about the prophecy next.

~ Prophecy ~

As above, so below

- ***When twin witches are born, they must wear the Horn of Hades. (Vittoria and I.)***
  - ***Twins signal the end of the devil's curse.***
- ***Some witches think it means the use of both light magic and dark magic.***
  - ***Others think a prince of Hell will fall in love with a witch.***
- ***One twin will rule in Hell, the other Heaven. (Both forced to sacrifice.)***

My breath caught as I reread the second point. *Twins signal the end of the devil's curse.*

"Holy goddess above. It can't be…"

How did we all miss that earlier? My mind raced with thoughts of Claudia's scrying session once again. About how "he" roamed free and the impossibility of it. She didn't mean the angel of death. She'd been warning us about the devil. If my twin and I ended his curse, it was likely our birth that broke the magic binding him, not an action we'd taken.

Which meant he hadn't been chained in Hell like we'd believed.

And he hadn't been for nearly two decades. While I'd been investigating Vittoria's murder, he'd been free, doing the goddess knew what.

So why, then, did Pride possess the body of Antonio and send Wrath to collect me in his stead? If he was not forced to reign in Hell, he could have come for me himself. He could have come to collect *all* of his potential brides. Why delegate that duty to Wrath?

Unless my earlier suspicion was correct and he was never actually in need of a bride. And the murders were committed for another reason.

Fear slid down my spine. I glanced at the new clock on my nightstand.

I'd wished for the bedside table and clock before turning in for the night, and both had magically appeared while I slept. I didn't know if the room was magicked to my wants, or if Wrath had simply guessed I'd need them. It was likely the latter. Wrath's attention to detail was astounding. As if he had nothing better to do than send for bedside tables.

Dinner was at midnight and there was still an hour left before then. Which gave me just enough time to rush back to the demon prince's personal library. I'd planned to spend the time practicing harnessing my magic source, but that could wait. I needed to retrieve the journal on House Pride and sneak it back to my chamber. Immediately. Demon language or not, I'd find some way to read it, even if I had to bargain away another piece of my soul to accomplish it.

I managed to shove both the skull and stolen journal next to the first skull—hiding them all behind a voluminous dress—and close my wardrobe just as a knock sounded at the door. Exhaling quietly, I said a quick prayer to the goddess of lies and deception and hoped I'd not only make it through the night but that I'd come out more victorious than I dreamed.

I smoothed down the front of my bodice and crossed from my bedchamber into the sitting room that doubled as an antechamber.

With any luck, my racing heartbeat would be mistaken for nerves about dinner.

I opened the door and Fauna smiled broadly. Her happiness didn't seem forced and a knot loosened in my chest. Perhaps I could strike a bargain with her to read the journal—she was a demon; she would no doubt possess the skills needed to read the demonic language.

But I wasn't ready to hand over my trust just yet.

Unaware of my silent assessment and wandering thoughts, her gaze quickly traveled over me. "You look lovely, Emilia."

"You do, too." An understatement. She looked resplendent in a silver gown that appeared to be made of liquid metal. Images of Roman centurion breastplates crossed my mind; all she needed was

the scarlet skirt or cape to complete the look. “Your gown is like armor.”

“Better to shield from the murderous glances with.” She winked and stepped back into the corridor, her expression turning serious. “Are you ready? We should make our way there soon. Guests are expected to arrive fashionably late, but not late enough to stoke royal ire.”

My pulse pounded. I hadn’t heard from—or seen—Wrath at all except for the note he sent regarding my clothing earlier. I had no idea what to expect from him tonight: how he would act in front of his subjects, if he’d ignore my presence, mock me, or seat me in a place of honor.

Maybe he wouldn’t even bother to show up. Perhaps he’d throw me to the wolves and see if I was vicious enough to grow fangs and make it out on my own. After our encounter in the library, he certainly seemed to hold a grudge against my family. What better way to exact revenge on them than by leaving me alone in a room full of bloodthirsty demons?

“Will Wrath be attending?”

“Yes.”

The deep, smooth voice owned my attention with just one word. My eyes snapped to his. Wrath stood in the corridor, dressed in a signature black suit, his gaze darkening at the sight of me. A crown of obsidian snakes dusted with gold sat upon his head. If a tall, menacing shadow had sprung to life—appearing both dangerous and tempting as sin—it would look just like him.

I told myself his unexpected appearance outside my bedroom suite caused the flutter in my pulse, and that it had absolutely *nothing* to do with the handsome prince or the predatory gleam in his gaze. The gaze that was trained wholly on me as if the rest of the realm could burn and he’d pay it no mind. There was something in the way he stared that…

Fauna twisted around to see who had caught my attention and immediately fell into a deep curtsy. “Your highness.”

“Leave us.”

With a quick look of sympathy in my direction, Fauna hurried down the corridor and disappeared from sight. Once the sound of her heeled shoes faded, Wrath stalked closer, his heavy focus sliding from the animal-bone crown I wore, to his ring on my finger, and inched all the way down to my toes before he dragged it back up. I did my best to breathe in even intervals.

I couldn’t tell if it was ravenous greed, wrath, or lust glinting in his eyes. Maybe it was a combination of all three. It seemed the underworld wasn’t only testing and prodding *my* desires now, it was a

battle he was suddenly fighting, too.

When he finally finished his thorough inspection of my attire, his attention settled on mine. A tiny spark jolted through me as our gazes clashed and held.

It was hardly anything, a bit of static electricity one experienced after scuffling their feet and touching metal on an arid day. Except… it didn't feel like *nothing*, exactly.

It felt like the first indication a violent storm was approaching. The sort where you either stood your ground or ran for cover. It was as if the air between us grew heavy and dark with the promise of nature's fury. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine thunder rattling my teeth as winds whipped around, threatening to drag me into the swirling vortex and devour me whole. It was the kind of storm that broke cities, destroyed realms.

And Wrath controlled it all with one powerful glance.

"You look like a beautiful cataclysm."

I laughed, trying to ease the strange tension hovering between us. His choice of words made me wonder just how well he could read my emotions. Maybe none of my secrets had ever been safe from him. "It's every woman's dream to be likened to a natural disaster."

"A violent upheaval. I'd say it suits."

A smile almost made an appearance on his handsome face. Instead, he motioned for me to spin around. I slowly twisted to give him a look at the entirety of me.

The back of the gown was as scandalous as the front. A deep *V* descended all the way down, exposing me nearly to my hips. A thin gold chain linked between my shoulders and swung like a pendulum against my spine, the only other bit of adornment I wore.

It was only because I'd been straining to listen, but I heard the slightest rasp of his breath as he inhaled sharply. Something resembling satisfaction coursed through me.

I was worried I'd feel self-conscious with large swaths of skin showing between my front and back, and the way the gown clung seductively to each curve, but I felt the opposite. I felt powerful. Now I understood why Wrath chose his clothing with such care. I commanded attention without ever opening my mouth.

It was a gamble I'd taken while dressing and—judging from the points of heat at my back and what I imagined was Wrath's inability to keep his gaze from returning to me—I believe it worked. At dinner I wanted all eyes to be fastened on me when I walked in, all conversations to cease. I would not cower behind columns and slink in undetected. If Wrath's subjects were anything like him, I couldn't be seen as weak. They would scent my fear like a swarm of sharks finding a drop of blood in the sea and strike with the same predatory

violence.

I went to shift around again, but Wrath stilled me with a light touch on my shoulder. His bare skin blazed against mine. “Wait.”

Perhaps it was the soft way he said it, or the feeling of intimacy in his voice, but I obeyed his wish. He carefully gathered up my hair and swept it to one side, letting the strands tickle and tease as they slid across my shoulders. I bit my lip. Shoulders were more erogenous than I’d ever given them credit for. Or maybe it was just the way Wrath moved closer until I felt the heat of him against my skin, and a tiny, intrigued part of me longed to feel more.

He looped a necklace over my head, the weight of it settling just above my cleavage, and fastened it more slowly than was necessary. But I didn’t complain or step away.

When he was done, he trailed one finger down my spine, following the line of the thin chain, inadvertently coaxing a small shudder. It took every ounce of stubbornness I could muster to not lean into his caress. To recall my hatred. Because surely that’s what that feeling was: the all-consuming, raging fire of loathing.

I slowly turned until we faced each other again. His gaze dropped to my necklace and I finally looked down to see what he’d placed on me. I inhaled sharply as my silver *cornicello* caught the light. “Does the devil know you’re giving this to me?”

Wrath didn’t take his attention from the amulet. “Consider it borrowed, not given.”

“Can you do that? Won’t he come after you?”

He made a show of glancing down each end of the empty corridor before looking at me again. “Do you see anyone trying to stop me?” I shook my head. “Then stop worrying.”

“I am most certainly not…” His mouth twisted into a troublesome grin as I trailed off, leaving the lie unspoken. I blew out a quiet breath. “It doesn’t mean what you think it does. Stop smirking.”

“What, exactly, do *you* think I believe it means?”

“I don’t care what you think. I’ve simply decided to be cordial for the time being. And I am merely tolerating our current situation until I leave for House Pride.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me you hate me, that I am your worst enemy. Better yet, tell me you don’t want to kiss me.”

“I’m not interested in playing this game.” He arched a brow, waiting, and I fought the urge to roll my eyes at his smugness. “Fine. I don’t want to kiss you. Satisfied?”

A spark of understanding flared in his gaze. I realized a second too late what I’d done; what he’d known the moment the words left my

traitorous lips. He stepped forward and I quickly stepped back, bumping against the wall.

He leaned in, bracing himself on either side of me, his expression smoldering enough to start a fire. “Liar.”

Before I dug myself a deeper grave, his mouth slanted over mine, stealing my breath and any further denial as easily as he’d stolen my soul.

NINE

His kiss consumed and seduced me. Just as he'd meant it to. It wasn't fast or hard or fueled by hatred or fury. It was an ember, a promise of the blazing fire to come with a bit of careful tending. I almost considered it sweet—the kind of chaste embrace two courting lovers stole when their chaperone wasn't looking—until he slowly raised my arms above my head, pinning me to the wall by my wrists. He took my bottom lip between his teeth and bit down gently. Then I remembered: he was no angel. And I was suddenly all too willing to be damned.

Curse this realm and its fiendish machinations. Its need for sin. My undeniable need for *him*. Right now there was no blood oath with the devil. No betrothal or obligations to my family. There was only this moment, this wicked prince, and the heat steadily building between us.

Wrath's body molded against mine, rock hard and unyielding in all the right places. Whatever hunger I felt was equally matched by him. I wish I hated it. I wish I didn't run my tongue over his lips, or sigh as he obeyed my silent demand and deepened our kiss.

This new kiss devoured, plundered, stole. It was apology and wanting and a fierce refusal to submit to any true feelings all in one. Primal need at its most basic level. I couldn't tell if letting myself give in to this wild feeling frightened or thrilled me.

I yanked away, breathing hard. "Is this real?"

"Yes."

As if to prove the truth in his statement, his hips rolled forward and I was almost certain the whole castle quaked the second our bodies connected. There was no mistaking how much this dark prince wanted me. I grabbed the lapels on his jacket and brought his lips back to mine.

For one heart-thundering moment, I wished he'd hike my gown up right there, bury himself deep inside me and release every last one of my trapped desires. I longed to forget where I was and what I had to do. I wanted to abandon all of the hurt and pain and grief that were never far. All I desired was the sweet oblivion of touch. Wrath could easily provide that. And more.

He leashed himself and broke away from our kiss, only to begin languidly stroking the top of my bodice. Need flared through me and seemed to mirror itself in him. He dragged his hands down my sides, gripping me a little tighter to his body. "You may destroy me yet."

"Sooner rather than later if you don't stop talking and kiss me again."

"Demanding, angelic creature."

He smiled indulgently at me, then obliged. *This kiss*. It was slow and drugging and made me realize he wasn't the only one in danger of being destroyed. He tilted my face up, traced the line of my jaw, then slid his fingers down my neck, lightly brushing them across my pulse point.

Tiny bits of electricity sparked beneath his caress. I'd almost forgotten he'd Marked me, giving me a way to summon him without using his House dagger. The tiny, nearly invisible *S* tingled. Nonna said the Mark was a high honor, one that was rarely given.

She hadn't been pleased.

I immediately tunneled back into myself and forced the addictive quality of his kisses aside. I almost felt the magic of the world recede like the tide going out, its disappointment crashing in reluctant waves around us.

Wrath gently released his hold on me, sensing the emotional shift.

"Why?" I managed to get one word out, my voice still thick with desire.

"I didn't think you'd prefer an audience."

An indecent image of him taking me on the dining room table flashed across my mind. It was so vivid I swore I heard sounds of shock from guests as their prince showed me just how sinful he could be, glasses shattering and forks clattering onto the finest demon china as Wrath drove us both over the edge, heedless of anyone who looked on.

I swallowed a nervous giggle. That entrance would certainly make an impression House Wrath would not soon forget. I shoved those

scandalous thoughts away.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

Though I *did* wonder why he decided to kiss me now.

His teeth bared in a semblance of a smile, a knowing gleam entering his eyes. Evasion admitted. I couldn't help but shake my head, my lips curling up at the edges. It was progress, small though it may be. Or maybe I was finally learning to read him better. Though I suspected—in this particular moment—he was also not trying to hide from me as much. I tried not to let wariness ruin the moment.

"I was talking about Marking me. Not whatever"—I nodded between us—"this is."

He searched my face for a strained minute, the last vestiges of heat leaving his expression. His eyes were nearly solid black now. This time there was no mistaking the rumble that shook the castle. He rolled his shoulders, as if releasing tension in them and between us.

Wrath held his arm out to me, all traces of passion wiped from his face.

Here stood the cold and unfeeling prince of Hell.

"We can't linger anymore. It's time to meet my court."

Our arrival outside the oversized bone-carved doors of the royal dining hall was a blur. I couldn't recall if Wrath had spoken to me on our seemingly endless walk here, or if he'd escorted me in complete, stoic silence. It was likely the latter; I couldn't imagine him ever engaging in something as pedestrian as inquiring about my day or the weather.

Not that I would have noticed either way.

There was an odd feeling in my chest; a slight tugging or gnawing or peculiar combination of the two. At first I thought it was panic fluttering against my ribs, fear over what had just transpired between us, but that wasn't quite right. The feeling was slowly pooling out, traveling from my heart like a meandering stream along the underside of my arm.

Wrath turned his head in my direction, a deep furrow forming in his brow.

I glanced down at what he'd been staring at. My *cornicello* glowed that pale, unearthly purple of a human's *luccicare*. It had happened twice before. Once when I'd first found Wrath standing over the corpse of my twin. And again when I'd found my amulet half-buried in a tunnel after it had been stolen. Right before the almost incorporeal

Umbra demons had attacked and Envy had stuck his House dagger deep into Wrath's belly.

My hands curled into fists as I remembered the way Wrath's blood had dried on my hands, under my nails. The utter feeling of…

"Breathe." His voice was deep and calming. "We will make introductions, then leave if you do not wish to stay and dine with them."

"I'm not nervous."

And I was surprised to discover that was true. I let go of Wrath's arm and brushed my fingers over the cool metal of the amulet for comfort, an old habit I'd probably never break. The devil's horns, I reminded myself with a small shudder. Not an amulet to ward off evil. This necklace was no longer the innocent charm I'd believed it was all my life.

Upon contact, a small current passed into my skin, alarming me enough to yank my hand back. That was new. I flicked my attention to Wrath. "Did you see that?"

He nodded, not taking his gaze from the shrunken devil horn. Concern was still present in his features. "Are you able to wear it during the meal?"

"Of course," I said. "I've worn it for almost two decades."

"If you experience anything uncomfortable, tell me immediately."

Wrath seemed on the verge of saying something else but changed his mind at the last moment. Now my heartbeat quickened. "Uncomfortable how?"

"Anything unusual. No matter how small or seemingly innocuous."

I was about to tell him of the tingling sensation, but it faded into nothing before the words could form on my tongue. Perhaps it *was* only nerves getting the better of me. I'd traveled to the underworld with one of the Wicked, made a blood bargain with the devil, and was seconds away from meeting the Prince of Wrath's scheming court of demons.

Not to mention, I'd just been thoroughly ravished by someone who was *not* my intended and my lips were probably swollen in accusation. While my emotional feelings for Wrath were much more complex, I hadn't disliked the kiss. In fact, it seemed to have unlocked a truth I didn't want to examine closely. He'd asked if I could bed someone I hated, and while my mind still churned with anger over his betrayal, my body responded to his touch.

I couldn't imagine Pride taking the news of my tryst with his brother well. Who knew if he had spies in this court, eager and ready to report back any unsavory business? While I wouldn't mind sowing seeds of discord among the two Houses, I did not want to alienate my

betrothed and ruin my chance to solve Vittoria's murder. I had every right to be nervous. It would be odd if I wasn't.

Wrath leaned in and skimmed his knuckles over my neck, his voice as soft as his touch. Whatever magic fueled his summoning Mark instantly calmed me. "Ready?"

I nodded. He studied my face and must have seen I was indeed primed for my introduction to House Wrath. Without warning, he spun on his heel and kicked in the doors.

He strode through them right as they crashed against the wall, his footsteps claps of thunder in the sudden silence. My breath caught. It was not at *all* the way I'd imagined making our grand entrance. Given his penchant for fine clothing and impeccable manners, I thought he'd be more… genteel or refined. I should know better than to assume anything about him.

A wave of smartly dressed demons dropped to their knees, their heads bowed and eyes lowered as he stalked into the room. Wrath paused several paces inside the large dining hall and waited for me to make my way to him. My steps were slow and steady, unlike my pulse.

It felt like both an eternity and only a mere second had passed before I crossed the room, gown whispering over the stone, and halted near the Prince of Wrath.

When he spoke, his voice was laced with royal command. "Rise. And bid Her Highness Emilia Maria di Carlo, your future queen, welcome."

The goddesses must have been watching over me because I managed to swallow my shock without showing it. I subtly turned to Wrath, a question in my eyes. I had not been told about the "her highness" part. I imagined that would happen after the coronation, or whatever the demon equivalent was. The corner of his mouth twitched before his expression hardened again and he addressed the sea of curious demons in that cool, unforgiving tone.

"Remember what I said about respect. As a prince of Hell's intended, Lady Emilia's status has been elevated. You will only address her as 'her highness' or 'my lady.' Insult her, and you will answer to *me*."

Wrath stared at one lord in particular, and I assumed it was the one Fauna said he'd already threatened. I would not want to be on the receiving end of that look—it was cold enough to cause a shudder in surrounding nobles. And they did not seem like the kind of subjects who were easily cowed.

"Consider this my final warning."

Wrath shifted to me then, holding out his arm. I placed my hand in the crook of his arm and lifted my chin. We walked side by side to a

large table set at the back of the room, and I subtly let my gaze travel across the chamber, drinking in our surroundings. A tapestry hung against the far wall, depicting a warrior angel locked in battle with demons. Severed heads rolled at his feet. Blood-splattered and milky-eyed. An interesting choice for a dining room.

I brought my attention back down from that ray of sunshine. The table we were headed to was made from a solid piece of gorgeous old wood. A garland composed of various evergreens ran down the center of its length, along with an iron candelabra with spindly arms that sat just above the greenery. Cream and gold candle tapers decorated it from end to end, giving off a comfortable flickering glow. Black earthenware plates were set before gilded chairs. And the eating utensils were also made of the same deep gold. It was pure rustic elegance. Masculine edges with unexpected bits of warmth. Perfect for a warrior prince. I liked it very much.

Wrath angled us toward the center of the table where two larger, more ornate seats were located. Not quite thrones, but close. Unlike what I'd been told of human royal courts, we would not be sitting at opposite ends of the table. We were at its center and everyone else would be fanned out around us. There were two aisles of similar yet smaller wooden tables on either side of the room, creating a path for us to walk down.

These tables didn't have gold seats; they had matching wooden benches. All of them had an abundance of candles running their length, a fiery centerpiece for the coldest circle of Hell.

Servants I hadn't noticed lingering near the wall stepped forward, gracefully pulling out our chairs as we made our way around the table. Wrath waited until I sat down before taking his seat. Glasses of dark wine were quickly poured and set before us.

Frozen berries bobbed to the surface, enchanting and tempting. My gaze turned to the prince. I was about to ask why no one else had moved to take their seats, but shut my mouth.

Wrath's attention was already fixed on me, his eyes nearly glowing in the candlelight.

Everything faded into shadows. It was as if he and I were the only two in the room, the whole realm, and I couldn't stop my thoughts from returning to their earlier, scandalous vision of him making love to me until I saw stars. Just as the rakish heroes in my favorite romance novels promised to do to the objects of their affection and lust.

Ridiculous realm and its sinful inclinations. Of all the times for it to work its devious magic, now was the absolute worst. Though I wasn't all that surprised. Wrath mentioned this realm sensing areas of struggle and bringing them to the forefront. I was certainly fighting

inner emotions against physical longings.

Until I settled my internal war, I would likely be plagued by these urges.

I tore my focus from Wrath and shifted uncomfortably in my seat, looking to the wine. It would either help distract me or it would turn me into a feral creature, clawing at the prince's clothes. Thinking of his clothing was a terrible mistake; it quickly led to thoughts of him *without* a shirt. *Blood and bones*, this forbidden attraction was growing worse by the minute.

Perhaps I should excuse myself to get fresh air. I glanced around, searching for a balcony or terrace. I needed to cool down immediately. After my royal introduction, there was little doubt that everyone here knew I was promised to his brother. It would hardly seem appropriate for me to be openly lusting over this prince when I was about to marry the king of demons.

Wrath leaned in, his lips almost brushing the shell of my ear and I felt him smile. His voice was low enough so only I heard him. "One word and I'll send them away."

Temptation flared. "Do I appear that nervous?"

"I'm fairly confident what I'm sensing has nothing to do with nerves."

A flush crept up my neck. I had no idea he could sense… arousal. Goddess curse me. This realm would be the death of me yet. I forced my thoughts back to the reason I'd come to this world. It had not been seduction or wanting that made me sign my soul away. It was vengeance. Fury. And those emotions were more powerful than any sinful magic.

Or any sinfully alluring prince.

I placed my lips to his ear. "Are you sensing the knife I'm now considering stabbing you with, your highness?"

"If this is an attempt to change the topic, you're failing miserably." His hand dropped beneath the table, landing gently on my knee. There was little doubt it was a nonverbal acknowledgment of my most recent lie. "I am even more interested in where this may lead, *my lady*. You forget what sin I rule over. I am rather fond of a bit of knife-play."

"Your subjects are staring at us."

With his free hand, he picked up his wine and took a long, careful sip. He acted as if we were enjoying a drink alone together instead of being observed by the lords and ladies of Hell.

He set the goblet down and stared out at the silent, watchful crowd. "You may be seated."

I was loath to admit it, even silently, but his touch kept my nerves at bay as the royal court all took their seats. It was hard to

concentrate on fear when his long fingers stroked the thin material of my gown, drawing all of my attention to that point of contact. I imagined he was attempting to soothe me, but his touch had the opposite effect. My heart raced.

The cursed prince did not appear affected at all. My attention fell to his lap.

"A pleasure to finally meet you, Lady Emilia. You look goddesslike this evening. A true enchantress for the ages."

Wrath's hand tensed on my leg, before he slowly continued dragging that finger along the outer seam of my dress. I yanked my gaze from the prince. Directly across the table, standing behind his seat, a fair-haired demon grinned. It was the royal Wrath had glared at earlier. I did not return his smile. "I'm sorry, I don't believe we've been introduced. You are?"

"Lord Baylor Makaden, my lady."

It was indeed the demon who'd made crude comments. He sat and immediately began chatting with the lords and ladies to either side of him. More pleasant nobles joined us and trays of food were promptly brought out.

Fileted meats baked in flaky pastry. Roasted root vegetables dressed in herbs. Crusty loaves of bread that smelled of intriguing spices. Serving bowls filled with dark gravy and sauces. None of the food was familiar or reminded me of home, but it wasn't as different as I'd feared. I'd been secretly harboring worries of strange multi-eyed animals and steaming, raw offal. This was truly a delight.

Wrath removed his hand from my knee only to surprise me with carving the meat and filling my plate with a bit of everything on the table. Other lords and ladies watched from lowered lashes, some bold enough to whisper. I had a feeling this was not typical behavior for the prince. He ignored them, though he no doubt felt their attention and silent speculation.

"Would you care for extra sauce, my lady?" he asked.

I flicked my attention to him, pulse thrumming. He was definitely putting on a show, but I had no idea for whose benefit. Playing along with his scheme, I shook my head. "No, thank you, your highness."

My use of his title seemed to please him, though I doubted the almost imperceptible curve of his lips was noticeable to anyone else. After he tended to my plate, he heaped generous portions onto his own, then struck up a conversation with the lord to his left.

This was the version I'd expected earlier, the prince with exemplary manners. Not the barbarian who'd kicked in doors. Though both aspects of him were intriguing. Goddess help me. I had no business finding him intriguing or attractive at all.

I politely listened to the noblewoman beside me as she

complained of her lady's maid, then of her sour stomach, and of the bug-eaten tapestry in her receiving hall.

I let her talk freely about all the things that angered her while I ate. Her attention roved over my tattoo, the amulet, and rested on the ring on my finger, but she never asked about them. Thus far no one was straying to any topics of note and I doubted I'd learn much aside from idle gossip. Tonight the court would be on its best behavior.

I wasn't sure I was pleased but at least the food was worth the trouble. My meat cut like butter and tasted as rich. I did my best to concentrate on conversations and not lose myself in the flavors. Whoever cooked this meal was immensely talented. I'd love to watch them in the kitchen, taking notes. Perhaps I might tinker with my own sauce variations. Add a bit of sea salt and herbs to the flaked pastry to round out the flavors the meat had been marinated with.

Several times I felt an intruding stare and glanced up to find Lord Makaden's attention fixed on my chest. His hungry expression indicated he wasn't looking at the amulet. I ignored him as Wrath had done. Worms like him should remain beneath notice. Though that comparison was hardly fair to the poor worms.

The woman next to me, Lady Arcaline, she'd finally informed me, stopped regaling me with her wrath-filled complaints long enough to ask, "Have you met anyone from the court outside of this evening's dinner?"

"Yes, I met Lady Fauna in the library."

Lady Arcaline made a dismissive sound and turned to the demon to her other side.

With everything that had happened, I forgot about Fauna. I sipped my wine and looked around the room, surprised to see her chatting with Anir and another young demon at the end of our table. It was too bad they weren't seated closer; it would have been much more enjoyable.

Before I could reflect on feeling camaraderie with anyone in Wrath's court, Lord Makaden leaned across the table, boldly ogling my lips. It was an improvement over his not-so-subtle perusal of my cleavage. It was fortunate for him that Wrath was still engaged in a discussion with the lord to his left and hadn't noticed his crude stare. I was willing to overlook his idiocy in favor of keeping the peace tonight. Tomorrow would be a different story.

I tasted another bite of meat and a bit of the herbed vegetables. They really were divine.

"Indulge me, Lady Emilia." Makaden's grating voice drew me away from my meal. "Have you ever experienced something as pleasurable as demon fare before? With each bite, you look as though you're in the throes of ecstasy. I must admit, it's captivating. I'm

envious of your fork."

The nobles seated nearest to me kept politely chatting, but I sensed their attention shift to us. It was a leading question, almost skirting the line of propriety. One detail I'd been picking up throughout dinner was that certain topics were as scandalous here as they were in the mortal world. Only the scandal seemed to involve overtly referencing other sins.

I didn't balk at answering the question.

"Tell me, Lord Makaden, are you always this preoccupied with the mouths of others? Perhaps you should reconsider what House of Sin you align best with."

He sipped his wine, then ran a finger around its rim, his attention never leaving my lips. The anger I'd been fighting to keep at a low simmer slowly began to boil the longer he stared.

I wondered what sort of impression I'd make on House Wrath if I maimed him before the next course. Given Wrath's banishment of "guttings at gatherings," I imagined it had once been a fairly regular occurrence. As the future queen, I might escape any true punishment. Facing Wrath's ire might be worth it just to wipe that repulsive look from Makaden's face.

"I've been cautioned against speaking of your tongue, my lady, so I won't comment on its sharpness. However, since you've brought mouths up, I can't help but wonder. You seem to be enjoying the meat well enough, but has that perfect little mouth of yours ever tasted cock?"

My jaw clenched so tightly, I was surprised Wrath didn't hear the grinding of my teeth. Lord Makaden was not referencing a chicken dish, though his words were clever enough he might pretend otherwise. I slowly exhaled. He was trying to get a rise out of me.

I refused to let him succeed.

"If not, we'll have to remedy that soon. Tonight, perhaps?" He dipped his finger into the wine, then slowly sucked the liquid off. The wide smile he gave me didn't reach his hate-filled eyes. I briefly fantasized about popping those beady things from his head. "I'll even prepare it for you myself. I've been told, on more than one occasion, how good mine is."

My grip tightened on my dinner knife. I wanted nothing more than to shove it into his heart. Without giving much thought to the consequences, I lifted the blade and stood, my beautiful chair scratching along the stone in shrill warning.

The room drew in a collective gasp. It was the last sound that was made before Lord Makaden's garbled screaming began. Warm liquid sprayed across my chest and face. I was so startled, I dropped the knife and wiped at my cheeks. My fingers were coated in red liquid.

A second later the metallic scent hit my throat. Blood. Blood was now splattered across the evergreen garland on the table, across *me*. My attention fell to the source of gore.

On the place set before the vile lord sat a severed, impaled tongue.

I stared down at my dinner knife, unblinking, unsure if I'd attacked him. Then I noticed Wrath's House dagger. It still vibrated from the force he'd used to shove it through the plate and then that far into the table. I let out a quiet breath, unable to look away. The lavender gemstones in the snake's eyes glowed in fury. Or maybe bloodlust.

I'd forgotten how the dagger gloried in its offerings.

"Dinner is over," the demon prince declared, his voice dangerously low. He yanked his bloodied blade free. "Get out."

TEN

Chairs and benches scraped across the stone floor at once. Anir was at my elbow a moment later, his grip firm but gentle as he escorted me out of the royal dining hall and up a flight of stairs hidden behind a vibrant garden tapestry.

I was so shocked, I didn't protest. Nor did I look to see if Wrath had followed us. Perhaps he was butchering the rest of Makaden. Skewering various organs to put on pikes outside the castle, a generous offering to whatever carrion birds circled these cursed skies. Goddess above. I still heard the faint echo of the wretched lord's howls. They chilled me to the core.

"How?" I could hardly comprehend the last sixty seconds. Wrath had moved so fast I hadn't registered the attack until it was over. And then he'd stood there, quietly commanding everyone to leave as if he hadn't just brutally divested someone of a body part…

I rubbed my arms; the stairwell felt unbearably cold all of a sudden.

"Watch your steps. The stones are uneven in this corridor."

I gathered up my skirts and focused on climbing the stairs as quickly as my shoes and gown allowed. My shock was incrementally giving way to a different emotion altogether. One that surprised me as much as the sudden burst of violence. My grip tightened almost painfully on my gown, as if I was now strangling the material.

Anir led us up flight after flight, occasionally tossing glances over his shoulder, his free hand resting on the hilt of his blade. I couldn't

imagine anyone being brave or stupid enough to follow us, especially after the blood-soaked scene we escaped from.

Wrath exploded from an *insinuation*. If someone tried physical harm or assault, a swift death would be a kindness. And there had been no hint of kindness in the demon prince's face.

Only cold fury.

Which was much worse. A hot temper eventually burned out, but the ice that coated the prince's features was glacial. Centuries would pass and his anger would remain fresh.

We exited through a hidden panel at the top of the stairs and a slight tingling sensation passed over me. Anir didn't speak again until we stood outside the door to my suite.

Even there his sharp gaze swept around the empty corridor as if he expected trouble to materialize. I did not share his concern. My private rooms were near the end of this wing and there was only one other set of doors here. Regardless if Makaden had allies, furious demons driven wild with the sin of their chosen House, Wrath would eliminate them with nary a thought.

If my anger was an aphrodisiac to him, his court's anger likely nourished and fed his power in droves. Wrath thrived on fury in every sense of the word.

I glanced down the opposite end of the corridor; an ornate iron gate had dropped from the ceiling, locking out anyone who tried to enter this section. My jaw ached from how hard I now clenched it. Being caged in didn't thrill me, but at least there was another exit in the secret panel if I wanted to leave. One that was magically warded, if the tingling sensation was any indication. Wrath had used the same magic back in my realm to protect me from his brothers.

The fact that he'd taken precautions in his own royal House wasn't comforting, but I trusted that no one would slip past his wards.

"Makaden had that coming for decades."

I pulled my attention to Anir. "I imagine he did."

"Then why…" His voice trailed off as he really looked me over. "You're angry."

Wrong. I was furious. It was a wonder steam wasn't billowing out of my ears.

If I could not handle repugnant creatures like Lord Makaden on my own, I would never gain the respect of this court or any other.

Wrath ought to count his demonic blessings he wasn't the one standing here with me now. I'd take his precious blade to his throat, tear the clothes from my person and bathe in his warm blood as I slit him ear to ear.

The unexpected pleasure I felt, thinking such a dark, wicked thing yanked me back to my senses. While the flames of my fury banked,

the embers of rage remained. I was not nearly as horrified as I should have been by my almost literal bloodlust.

Anir's mouth twisted up on one side. He must have read the promise of murder flashing in my eyes and found it amusing. He was wise enough not to laugh.

"His private chambers are at the end of this hall. Give him ten minutes, I'm sure he'll be there by then."

I was too angry to show my surprise. Of course Wrath placed me close to him. He was keeping a careful watch on his brother's fiancée. Ever the dutiful soldier. Except for when he'd kissed me before dinner. I doubted *that* was part of his orders. Though, knowing him, maybe it was another twisted scheme he'd dreamed up to keep me preoccupied and not causing trouble.

I spun on my heel and slammed the door to my suite behind me.

I passed the time by removing Makaden's blood and gore from my body. I sat at the vanity in my bathing chamber, dipping a linen towel into the crystal washbasin, turning the water there a pinkish red. I dabbed at the remaining dampness while staring at the silent woman in the mirror. I couldn't find any hint of the girl I'd been before my sister's murder.

That Emilia had perished in the room with my twin, had had her heart ripped from her, too, and it didn't appear as if she'd ever return. No matter how hard I fought, who I deceived, or how much of my soul I bargained away, nothing would ever bring my sister back. Even if I succeeded in destroying those who'd hurt Vittoria, I could see no way of ever happily returning to that simple, quiet life. The one where I was most content with my books and recipes.

This new reality felt strange, but fitting. It was a life where I didn't cringe at violence, only seethed that the punishment that had been dealt was taken from my eager hands. I wondered at death, at the ones we lost and how their loss stole something vital from us in return.

A tear slid down my cheek as I set aside the bloodstained towel.

"Enough," I said, quietly, forcefully to myself as I stood. I planted my hands on the vanity top and leaned in, glaring at my reflection. *"Enough."*

There was no longer any room for sadness or grief in my world. In my heart.

I focused intently on that anger, that spark in my core close to my

magic's source. It was as if a lava pit were bubbling inside me, ready to erupt. I'd never felt my power so strongly and realized it wouldn't take much to harness it. All I had to do was reach in and grab it.

I concentrated on my magic, imagined pulling it from wherever it originated and turning it into a handful of flame. Instead of fighting myself and forcing it to come, I let go.

Of my thoughts, of my fears. Of my worries.

I released everything except my wrath. That I held on to as if it were the most vital essence in my universe. Because it *was* the most vital thing in this circle of Hell. If the Prince of Wrath's anger was a glacier, mine was a raging inferno. And it would not burn out quickly.

I inhaled and exhaled, picturing myself breathing new life into the fire. If I could master my anger, focus on it without emotion, it might burn so powerfully and for so long it could even melt Wrath's impenetrable ice.

I held my palm out and whispered, *"Fiat lux."*

Let there be light.

Blasphemous to some mortals, perhaps. But not to a witch currently residing in the underworld and betrothed to the devil. A tiny ball of rose-gold flames hovered above my palm. It crackled like real fire, but did not burn me. I waited for the pain to begin, for my flesh to bubble and welt. Or char. For Wrath's ring to melt off my finger.

The fire only burned brighter, pulsed softly as if saying hello.

I stared, unfeeling as it shifted into a flaming flower. For a fraction of a second, I considered throwing it against the wall and watching my room—and all of its fine furnishings—incinerate. Tiny buds of embers catching and blooming into a garden of ash and flame.

I slowly closed my fingers around the burning flower, extinguishing it the way *I* should have extinguished the light in Makaden's eyes. I was still too angry to rejoice in what I'd just done. The magic I did not know I could summon. Later, there would be time to celebrate.

Now, I had other things to do. Like confront the demonic master of this house.

That same fury set my feet in motion exactly ten minutes from the time Anir had left. It propelled me out of my room, down the corridor, and made it easy to barge into Wrath's personal suite as if it were my own.

The door slammed against the wall, setting the candles flickering wildly on the mantel. Wrath was neither startled nor disturbed. He stood with his back to me, undressing. As if he knew I'd come to him, furious instead of scared.

I crossed my arms. "Well?"

The demon prince studiously ignored me. He shrugged out of his

shirt and tossed it over an armchair. His trousers sat low on his hips, and with the fire blazing in the hearth, I had a very good view of the lines of ink that curved over each finely carved muscle on his back.

Without speaking or looking at me, he moved deeper into his personal space. I trailed behind, too mad to focus on any details of his rooms aside from the deep merlot walls and black furniture and fabric. It was dark and sensual. Like other parts of the castle where the prince spent most of his time.

"Look at me." My voice was low, soft. It sounded like a caress, though that was intentional. The softness was meant to distract from the underlying steel in the command.

Wrath turned with intention. There was something seductive in the way he moved; powerful and strong, yet fluid in all the ways he'd require for battle. Everything about his movements indicated he was a predator. But I was not afraid. Not even after his violent display. Wrath would never harm me. And I was almost certain it had little to do with duty.

Looking at him now, with the promise of unending punishment and not an ounce of regret in his glare, I understood what he did, *why* he did it, even if he didn't yet.

He stood before a large bed, the silky sheets like an undisturbed lake behind him. An ebony fur throw covered the bottom portion. I thought about disrobing and tossing myself onto it, causing another ripple in the smooth perfection of his world. For a split second, I almost imagined I'd done that before. I cut that thought off before any sinful magic could take hold.

Wrath's expression turned unreadable. "It's late. You should leave."

"We need to discuss what just happened."

"I issued an order, Makaden ignored it. Twice. The consequences were made clear."

I narrowed my eyes; his answer was a little too stiff and practiced. I stalked closer. "Is that all? You attacked him because of your order?"

"He chose to insinuate you should taste his cock. In front of my court." His shoulders moved with the effort he was exerting to control his breaths, to remain calm. He shouldn't have bothered. There was no quieting the storm currently raging in his eyes. "If I let his disobedience slide, I will be seen as weak."

"That was *my* fight. If you interfere whenever someone says something unflattering, no one will ever respect or fear *me*. I will not appear weak for you to maintain strength." I moved until I stood directly before him, the heat of our combined anger prickling my skin. I wonder if he felt that, too. And if it soothed him. "Was this a male pride issue? I highly doubt your hold on your court is so tenuous that

one obnoxious noble could diminish your rule."

"You know pride is not my sin."

It was not the first time I'd wondered if that was the full truth, but I let it go.

"I want my own blade. Perhaps if I'm armed and can disembowel someone myself, you won't act so overbearing in front of your subjects again. Because if you do"—I allowed just enough sweetness into my tone, making his eyes narrow with suspicion—"next time I will stick my dinner knife in *you*. Consider that a vow from your future queen."

Wrath crossed his arms and stared me down. His eyes flickered with some emotion I couldn't quite place; he was no doubt calculating a hundred reasons why arming me was a bad idea. Especially after my last declaration. I waited for the argument he seemed eager to give.

"I'll see to it you have a blade of your own. And lessons."

"I don't require—"

"That is my offer. It will do no good to arm you only to have you injure yourself in a fight because you can't wield it properly. Do we have a bargain?"

"Only one reasonable demand… and you're agreeing with me? That easily?"

"It appears I am."

I looked him over. "You already considered arming me."

"I am the general of war; of course I considered it. We'll discuss other training options in the morning. If we're going to practice physical lessons, we'll add blocking magical influence, too. Do you accept the terms of our bargain?"

"Yes."

"Good. Go back to your rooms. I'm tired."

I let his poor attitude go without comment. He was still tense, his own anger not quite leashed. I considered leaving him to his own foul company, but instead I gave him a teasing half-smile. "I imagine so. Maiming is exhausting business."

He almost returned my grin, but it never quite reached his lips. "Good night, Emilia."

"Good night, my jealous, mighty tongue-slayer."

"You say such horrible things."

But the gleam of intrigue indicated he didn't mind. Quite the contrary. I waited for him to turn and walk away, but he seemed rooted in place. Indecision scrawled across his features.

Belatedly, I realized I hadn't taken myself from the room, either.

I held still as he angled my face up, his long fingers stroking the side of my neck in the lightest caress. I should have been thinking of the dagger he'd just held, of the blood that had stained his hands moments ago. Of the ruthless way he'd acted. These hands could

remove a tongue without much effort, but they were also capable of tenderness. Of protection.

And, undoubtedly, pleasure.

I wet my lips, recalling our earlier kiss. “I only spoke the truth.”

Wrath stared into my eyes before tearing his gaze away with obvious effort. He did not deny being jealous. Nor did he appear surprised by the emotion. I wondered if he’d already identified it and was unsure what to do with the knowledge. Not that much *could* be done if either of us entertained the thought. I was promised to his brother. And his duty to that mission would always come first. What happened earlier between us would not happen again.

His hand fell away, my skin instantly missing his heat, while my mind reeled with confusion over my conflicted feelings.

“I’ll see that you have your blade and first lesson tomorrow. Good night.”

This time, there was no hesitation on his part. He disappeared through a doorway covered with sheer panels, and, feeling dismissed, I finally turned and headed out the way I’d come. I paused just inside the entrance to the antechamber, my feet unwilling to carry me from the room. I knew I should leave; I’d gotten what I’d come for, but something held me back.

I drifted into the bedroom, closer to those billowing panels, and peered through them.

Wrath had escaped onto a balcony. He stood with his back to me, staring out toward the snow-covered hills and mountains jutting up in the distance, a bottle of wine perched beside him on the railing. The temperature never seemed to affect him. It certainly hadn’t prevented him from sleeping outdoors during the storm. Perhaps it was another perk of immortality.

Or maybe I’d gotten it slightly wrong earlier, maybe he wasn’t always cold fury. Maybe he possessed fire, too. And his ability to withstand the cold was simply the heat of his constant wrath, simmering, blazing, warming him more than the icy elements could hope to infiltrate.

My attention drifted to his drink again. Frost crept up the side of the glass, creating little spiderwebs of ice. The liquid inside the bottle was unlike anything I’d ever seen at home; similar to merlot or chianti, but not a deep red. It was a purple so dark it almost appeared black, but that wasn’t the most unusual or beautiful part. Silver specks floated like glittery bubbles all throughout it. Wrath topped off his glass and swirled it, setting the silver glinting into a frenzy.

It looked like he’d created his own shimmering galaxy. He set the glass on the railing beside him and inclined his head. “If you’re going to continue lurking in my bedchamber, you might as well drink this.

It'll help you sleep."

I thought about returning to my room, but curiosity got the better of me. I moved across the balcony and examined the glass without touching it. "It won't make me jump over the railing and dive into the snow, will it?"

Instead of answering, Wrath swiped the glass away and drank deeply. He handed it back and looked at me. Challenge lit his dark gaze.

I briefly fantasized about shoving him over the railing into the snowbank below, but I imagined he'd bring me with him and something about our bodies falling together made my heart race. Not because I feared the fall or getting hurt; I knew Wrath would maneuver us so he'd hit the ground. It was where *I'd* land that caused the uptick in my pulse.

I settled on sipping the starlike liquid. It was… delicious.

"Well?" he asked. "What do you think?"

"I love it."

"I thought you might." His voice turned quiet, contemplative. As if he hadn't meant to speak aloud or admit that. I wished I possessed a tiny bit of his ability to sense emotions. I was curious to know what he was feeling, why he sounded resigned.

I took another small sip and focused on the flavors. Something spicy, like fresh ginger. A bit of citrus, similar to lime. And there was a deep richness that blended the two perfectly. Not rum, but something close. I finished the rest of my glass and contemplated pouring more.

Wrath grinned. "Demonberry wine is one of the two finer offerings of this realm."

I picked up the bottle and shook it a little. The liquid glimmered like stardust. It was one of the most magnificent things I'd ever seen. "What makes it look like the night sky?"

"Those are demonberry seeds. They're small enough to look like bubbles. Or stars."

I topped off my glass and leaned against the railing. I was a little chilly, but I was far from cold. Maybe it was the wine heating me from the inside. From here I could clearly see the fiery lake that separated this stretch of territory from the ornate castle in the far distance. A bridge connected the two swaths of land, dark waters churning like a bubbling cauldron below.

For a second, I considered telling Wrath about the magic I summoned. I nodded toward the castle instead. "Which royal House is that?"

Wrath followed my gaze. "Pride's."

I took another sip of my drink. Demonberries fizzled on my

tongue. It was suddenly so quiet I could hear the slight crackle as the bubbles popped in the glass. “Have you heard from him yet?”

“No.”

“Does he know I’m here?”

“He does.”

I sighed. I sincerely hoped Pride would get over his namesake sin soon enough and send his cursed invitation. I wanted to solve the full truth of my sister’s murder and return to my family before I was old and gray. Or before *they* were old and gray. I’d likely not age much while here. That thought pierced the armor I’d erected around my heart, so I pushed it away.

We stood in companionable silence, each lost to our own thoughts while sipping our drinks. Wrath moved a little, his arm nearly touching mine, and I thought about how comfortable this was. Being here. With him. My enemy. Well, not quite.

The lines of who *we* were and how *I* felt about us were blurring. I had no idea if it was simply because he was familiar, and I was desperate to clutch at anything even remotely comfortable while here. Or if the sins and illusions were doing their hardest to confuse the matter. When we kissed earlier he’d felt nothing like an adversary.

As much as I wanted to receive Pride’s invitation, I’d grown somewhat fond of spending time with Wrath. I even looked forward to verbally sparring with him. Seeing his nostrils flare with frustration was becoming oddly endearing. The thought should have disturbed me, especially after the incident at dinner. But it didn’t.

I wasn’t sure what it said about me, about the entity I was becoming, but there was a deep sense of primeval desire that sparked when Wrath took that blade to Makaden, defending me.

For a little while, it seemed like we were partners again. I didn’t think I’d miss our time together in Palermo, and wasn’t sure what it meant that I did. I felt his attention shift to me.

“What’s the second offering?” I asked, meeting his gaze. He was closer than I expected, his attention briefly falling to my mouth as if it intrigued and beguiled him. My heart kicked up its beat. Wrath drew his brows together and shook his head, seeming to recall I’d asked a question. Whatever realization he’d just had had thoroughly entranced him. “You said the wine was only the first. What’s the second-best thing about this realm?”

“The Crescent Shallows.” He hesitated. “It’s a lagoon.”

That strange tension hovered between us like a spell that refused to break. I raised a brow, my lips half–turned up at the edges. “Let me guess, since this is Hell it’s frozen over?”

“No, actually. It’s one of the few places in the Seven Circles not touched by ice. It sits above a lava field, so the water is warmer than

bathwater, regardless of the air temperature."

"Do we have to fight a three-headed dog to get there?"

"No."

"Is traveling there like going through the Sin Corridor?" Wrath shook his head but didn't elaborate. I stepped closer, eyes narrowing. He was being more tight-lipped than normal. Which meant he was *definitely* concealing something. "Where is it?"

"Forget I mentioned it." He refilled his glass and took a strong pull of wine, refusing to meet my inquisitive stare. "It's late."

"Blood and bones. It's here, isn't it? Have you been hiding a hot spring from me?"

"Not hiding. There are rules that must be followed before entering the water. I doubt you'd like them. And even if you did, I don't think it's a good idea."

"I see." Wrath straightened at my tone and slowly glanced in my direction. When his full attention settled on me, I continued. "Instead of *asking* my opinion, you decided for me. Since I am to marry the devil, that makes me your future queen, doesn't it?" He didn't answer. "I would like you to take me there. Now, please."

"Nothing made may enter the water."

"Nothing… you mean clothing?"

"Yes. You'll need to fully disrobe before entering the water, my future queen." His smile was pure wickedness. "I didn't think you'd want to bathe with me naked."

"Is that all?" I highly doubted it. He'd seen me without clothing on more than one occasion over the last few months. That would not be a deterrent. This was about self-preservation. For him. "I imagine there's something about the water you'd like to avoid."

He looked me over slowly. It was impossible to tell what he felt. "On occasion it seeks the heart of those who enter. And reflects their truth."

I held his gaze. Maybe it was the wine, or this world and its proclivity toward sin, or the way his eyes glittered with triumph, but I refused to cede this battle.

I recalled what Anir said about challenging him. If I had to give up some of my truth to gain some knowledge of him, it was a small price to pay.

I jerked my chin at the bottle and glasses. "Take those and let's visit this magical lagoon. I could use a warm, relaxing bath after tonight."

Wrath's grin vanished. "You're certain that's what you want?"

"Yes."

It was a terribly dangerous answer, made apparent by the thick layer of tension that swiftly fell between us again, but it was the truth.

I did not want to go back to my chamber alone, nor did I want to part ways with this prince just yet. A night adventure to a magical hot spring sounded like the perfect distraction. I wanted a pleasant memory to cling to before bed. I did not want to replay the staked tongue incident over and over until sleep claimed me. And if I went back to my chamber alone now, that's exactly what would happen.

Instead of walking me there, Wrath took my hand in his and magicked us away. The familiar sensation of burning was replaced by a slight, warm tingle across my skin. It was far from unpleasant. I gasped as solid ground formed beneath us a moment later.

Wrath let go once he was sure I wasn't about to tumble over. "*Transvenio* magic isn't as jarring when we're traveling in this circle."

I wanted to ask him more about the magic but found all logical thought had been stolen as I took in our new location. We stood on the dark, glittering shore of a lagoon. It was shaped like an enormous crescent moon, and the water was a milky, glacier blue.

Fog drifted lazily above its surface. I managed to tear my gaze away from the sparkling pool long enough to glance at the obsidian walls that surrounded us. This lake was subterranean.

"Where are we, exactly?"

"Below House Wrath." He strolled down the shore a little way, then pointed out a stone arch. "The Lake of Fire feeds into these shallows from over there."

I looked up, expecting to see more stone, and sucked in a quiet breath. Stone did indeed cover us, but someone had painted the phases of the moon across it, along with a smattering of stars. *Breathtaking* was hardly the most accurate description. *Ethereal*, maybe, did it more justice.

I went to stick my toes in the water when the demon prince carefully hauled me back. "No cloth of any kind can taint the water. You need to remove your gown or hold the skirt up."

"Why?"

Wrath lifted a shoulder. "See those?"

I followed his gaze as it landed on a mammoth piece of driftwood. I leaned closer and squinted. "Is that… are those bones?"

I dragged my attention away from what remained of the unfortunate creature and focused on the prince at my side. The glint of amusement in his face was almost as sinful as he was. "Still want to go for a dip?"

"What happens if you bring the wine and glasses in?"

"I wouldn't. Come," he offered his hand. "I'll take you back to your room. You can keep the wine. It will relax you just as well as the lagoon would have. You've got a large private bath of your own. That will have to suffice."

Either he was worried about the lagoon revealing a truth he wanted to keep hidden, or he was convinced I'd change my mind and go back to bed. I gave him my own taunting smile as I deftly undid the enclosures on my gown. He watched as I slipped out of the silky red material, his throat bobbing a little as my lacy undergarments hit the ground next.

I took his ring off and set it on a smooth, flat rock. Then I straightened and held his gaze.

I stood bare before him, feeling anything but shy. I raised a brow. "Are you going to get undressed so we can swim, or are you planning on watching me all night?"

ELEVEN

Wrath's clothes vanished, leaving him standing naked and proud.

Any hint of smugness I'd felt disappeared when his clothing did. Devil curse me, I tried and failed *miserably* to not feed his ego by openly admiring him.

Great artists might try to capture his likeness but would undoubtedly fail. There was a certain mastery about him that defied his true form from ever being cast in something as mundane as bronze or carved in marble.

My gaze drifted across his broad shoulders, down his sculpted chest, then slowly inched lower, over each ridge of his abdomen, across his hips and lower until I finally took in his…

I jerked my attention back to his face. He was *very* obviously attracted to me. Clearly the sinful magic that thrummed below the surface of this world affected him more than I'd imagined. Though given his comments at dinner and the way our kiss had turned hungry and full of primal need earlier, maybe it wasn't so simple. For either of us.

My traitorous attention dropped again. I tried not to stare too long, but his left thigh had an interesting design inked onto it. Pointing downward, a dagger spanned from his hip to his knee. The blade looked like it had a close-up of roses on its surface, while geometric patterns were etched onto its hilt. Unlike his other metallic tattoos, this one had been done in grayscale.

I pulled my focus back to his eyes and waited, heart pounding, for

him to drag his attention over every inch of my exposed skin. My nerves hummed with anticipation; it was the first time I'd disrobed in front of him without it being the result of something clinical needed to revive me from near-death. Wrath's gaze remained fixed on mine as he offered me his hand, palm up. Something inside me deflated a bit.

I went to unhook the *cornicello*, but he shook his head. "That may stay. Along with the flowers and bones in your hair."

Confused, I dropped the amulet and wound my fingers through his. Technically, since they were the devil's horns, I supposed they didn't count as something made. And the bones and flowers were also organic material, so hopefully Wrath was right and all would be well.

We walked to the lagoon's edge and water lapped at my toes, warm and silky.

He watched me, waiting to see if I wanted to continue. I took another step and lavished in the way the water felt like a million tiny bubbles on my skin.

Once we were deep enough out, Wrath let go of my hand and bobbed under the water. He exploded up a moment later, whipping his head back and pelting me with droplets. His laugh was full and rich and his smile was one of the most genuine I'd ever seen from him. It made my heart stumble a bit. I dove under the water before he could see my expression.

When I broke the surface and pushed the tangle of wet hair from my face, I caught him staring. Unlike me, he didn't attempt to hide what he was feeling now. I thought about the Wicked, about their sinful games. The stories of their kisses being addictive enough for a mortal to sell their soul for the chance at another. The danger in gaining their attention. I'd undeniably gained Wrath's full attention. And the only danger I sensed was how powerful it made me feel.

Here lay a choice. Wrath, temptation incarnate, waited, as if he knew where my thoughts had drifted. I swore there was something about the forbidden that made it sweeter to taste.

Or perhaps that was just a lie I told myself. Maybe I simply liked the taste of him, against my better judgment. I waded closer and slowly reached for him. His breath caught as I turned him away from me and tentatively traced the lines of Latin tattooed across his shoulders. I'd been curious about the ink from the first moment I'd summoned him in the bone circle all those months ago. Goose bumps rose on his skin with each gentle pass of my fingertips.

"Astra inclinant, sed non obligant." I bit my lower lip, trying to translate it. "The stars…"

He rotated until we faced each other again, his eyes glowing softly in the dark. "The stars incline us; they do not bind us."

"Beautiful."

I did not miss the significance of him permanently inking onto his body that he did not want to be bound by anything. I thought of our betrothal bond, of how I'd forced it on him without knowing. Then I'd bound him to the summoning circle for days, refusing to set him free. No wonder he despised me then. It was a wonder he didn't hate me now.

"I'm sorry." The words were so soft, I wasn't sure he'd heard me. "For binding you."

He reached over and tucked a wet strand behind my ear, his touch lingering before he stepped back. "Fate may deal its hand, try encouraging our path or intervene, but we are ultimately free to choose our own destiny. Never doubt that."

"I thought you were without free will."

His smile was tinged with sadness. "Choice is granted to all. But for some it comes with a price."

"Did you get that tattoo to remind yourself of your choice?"

"Yes." His gaze fastened onto mine. "I believe John Milton, a mortal poet, said it best. 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.' I told you the power of choice, the appeal it holds for me. I would do terrible things, unforgivable things, to choose my destiny. Cursed and wretched though it may be. It is *mine*. Unless you've been without true choice, you can't understand the allure it holds."

"What of the serpent, was that another choice?"

"All of the ink on my body, with the exception of our tattoos, were my choice."

My attention fell to his lips and lingered before something a little lower caught my attention. Faintly, in silver ink, another phrase was scrawled under his left clavicle. I'd never seen it before. Without thinking, I ran my fingertips across the writing. *Acta non verba.*

I had no trouble understanding that one. Actions, not words.

"And the design on your thigh?"

Wrath went still, and it was only then that I realized I'd drifted near enough that our bodies were almost touching. I forgot my question, forgot everything except the fire in his gaze as it slowly consumed me inch by inch. I didn't think he could see much because the water was nearly to my neck, but it certainly didn't *feel* as if that were any true barrier.

When he looked at me with the heated intensity he was now… any lingering hatred or animosity between us burned away. Perhaps that was the truth he did not want revealed by the lagoon. The world's magic took hold, encouraging my emotions until I could no longer deny my growing desire, either. His wet-slicked skin slid against mine as I closed the distance.

Maybe it was the dreamlike beauty of the celestial scene painted

on the ceiling, or the sultry steam of the Crescent Shallows. Or maybe it was simply yearning made flesh, but I craved the sensation of his hands on my body. We were two consenting adults. And I wanted him to unleash all of his sensual power on me.

I thought about my earlier fantasy of him taking me against the wall or table.

Never, in all my life, had I reacted to someone in such a carnal way. I'd had crushes, dreams of kisses and more, but this was no small infatuation. This was desire in its purest form.

My longing was growing out of control. I wanted to touch him, no longer content with denying myself or my passions. All I needed to do was take that first step.

I rolled up onto my toes and brushed his damp hair back in gentle strokes.

I waited to see if he'd put distance between us. If he'd tell me I was the last creature in all the realms combined that he'd want. His expression was almost as tense as his body. I couldn't tell if he was fighting attraction, or if he was dutifully allowing an enemy to seduce him.

I leaned in and pressed my lips against the ink along his collarbone, giving him another opportunity to move. Instead of stepping aside, his hand splayed across my lower back, holding me in place. I knew, without a doubt, the mighty warrior would let me go if I decided to stop or walk away. My mouth moved to his other shoulder, kissing him there.

"Emilia." He said my name softly. It was so close to the version of him I'd conjured in the Sin Corridor, but this wasn't another fantasy. This moment was real.

"I know you won't tell me your true name." I trailed my hands down his chest. His intense gaze tracked each of my movements. "But it feels a little odd, murmuring 'Wrath' at a time like this."

I flicked my attention back up as he closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against mine. The mighty general of war was struggling with some inner battle. Perhaps he was worried this was another game of strategy, one he'd lose if he started playing by my rules.

I no longer knew if his fear was warranted. For once, we were on equal ground.

"So maybe we shouldn't worry about talking anymore," I continued. "At least not tonight." I explored the ridges of his abdomen, and he did not move away or flinch from my touch. "Maybe we can both choose to communicate a different way. Without words."

I thought about our last kiss, how savage and unrestrained it had turned. It was fueled by primal need and lust. I guided his face down to mine and brushed my lips across his. It was whisper soft, sweet.

There was a question in it, one I wasn't sure he'd answer.

This time I wanted things to be different. Even if it wasn't meant to last. We could have tonight, this moment, and surrender to whatever magnetic force was pulling us together.

There was no past or future, simply the present.

This encounter did not have to mean more than what it was. We did not have to fall in love or forget our schemes. Tonight we could form a truce, one that lasted only until sunrise. For one night, we could stop pretending this wasn't what we both desired. If I faced this unfamiliar part of me now, maybe the realm would stop tormenting me with so many sensual illusions.

I broke away from our embrace. "Unless you don't want this."

For one heart-pounding second, he didn't react. I thought I'd misjudged the moment. Then Wrath answered with a tender kiss and it didn't feel like he was my enemy. Or as if he was kissing me for any reason other than the fact he *wanted* to. Down in this chamber, far from the watchful eyes of his court and the roles we were supposed to play, we could simply be.

He chose this. Just as I did. And choice was power.

His strong hands slid down my sides as he stepped closer, bringing us flush together. I was suddenly surrounded by him, his scent, his massive body. All of his power and attention. He felt like living magic —maybe even more so than our last two encounters.

Something inside me came alive.

This time, when he swept his tongue into my mouth it was all I could do to not buckle from the sheer bliss. My hands drifted to his hips, and his inched down to mine, slipping under the warm water and gliding along my back as he anchored me against him.

I arched into his touch, forgetting any notion of going slowly. I needed pleasure. And I wanted him to give it to me as much as I would give in return.

He smiled against my neck before pressing a chaste kiss below my ear. I didn't have to see his face to know he was amused by my response. "Your highness is quite demanding."

If he was trying to distract me with that summoning Mark again, it wasn't working. Each time he'd touched it before, it doused any elevated emotions. I wouldn't *allow* it to distract either of us now. The part of me that had just awoken didn't want to drift off and slumber again.

My hands dipped below the water and I slowly dragged them back up his legs before sliding them away again.

He cursed under his breath and I grinned. "No more talking, remember?"

"Keep doing that, and I'm going to damn all the deities."

I drew small circles on his thigh, moving them higher and higher until his full attention zeroed in on precisely where *he* wished I'd explore next. Let him have a taste of how wild he'd driven me at dinner. "It's terrible, isn't it? Wanting something so badly only to be teased when it's finally within reach."

Apparently, he received my message loud and clear. His hand slid between my legs and he touched his tongue to mine the precise moment he stroked against that aching part of me. I gasped into his mouth, but it was cut off as he drew me tighter to him. His arousal pressed against my body. Hard and enticing. Just like him.

"Is this better, my lady?"

Oh, goddess, yes. *Much* better.

He slowly circled that wicked finger around my apex, all the while kissing me senseless. Heat exploded in my veins with each taunting stroke. I'd made a few poor choices in my life, but taking Wrath as a lover would *not* be one of them. He'd be just as unrestrained as I'd imagined, and that primal part of me welcomed this new battle of wills.

I lifted my hips, urging him to continue his exploration as I wound my arms around his neck, pulling him in for a deeper kiss. His finger partially plunged inside and I bit down on a moan. He withdrew it, his focus entirely on my body's reaction to the motion; the slight, shuddering exhalation, the way I reflexively moved against him, and held on tighter. He was learning what gave me the most pleasure, varying it a little and repeating it.

Goddess help me. The demon of war was a strategist on all levels.

He gently rubbed against that throbbing part of me with a second finger before turning his attention back to his slow, drugging kisses. Fire. Through no magic except for the exquisite power of his touch, he was turning my body into a million tiny flames of desire.

And he knew it. All of the teasing was driving me wild.

"Will you take me to your bedchamber?" My voice was like smoke. "Now."

"Is that what you want?"

"Yes." More than anything. I managed to nod and his clever fingers rewarded me with another loving stroke. "Hurry."

He nipped at my lower lip. "Does my queen command it?"

"Yes." Oh, goddess yes.

"Am I your humble servant now?"

I drew back. There was a devilish glint in his eyes. Even if I wanted to answer, my response was obliterated with his next kiss. We both knew he was not the kind to be ordered around. So he didn't rush. The Wicked creature took his time kissing me, all the while his fingers kept exploring, teasing, wringing pleasure in ways I didn't

know were possible.

He'd promised I would not mistake reality with an illusion when he touched me. He hadn't been lying. The Sin Corridor, this realm, nothing could compare to the magic of him.

The next time he touched me, I involuntarily rocked my hips forward and he finally answered my silent plea. His fingers slid all the way in, and he gently bit down on my lip to quiet my gasp. Which only succeeded in driving me wilder.

"Take your pleasure, my lady." I tentatively repeated the rocking motion. He watched me, his gaze burning. "Just like that."

He captured my moan with his next kiss and I buried my hands in his hair, needing to feel more of him. Somehow I'd leapt up and wrapped my legs around his hips. His free arm easily secured me in place. The sensation of the warm bubbling water and the friction of his calloused fingers was enough to drive me over the edge with raw need. Instinct took over.

Our bodies pressed together, our tongues and teeth and mutual hunger pumping through my veins. I realized the magic of the world wasn't creating this longing; it was enhancing what I already felt. And I felt more than I'd ever allowed myself to admit. I rolled my hips in time with each of his deep strokes. No longer timid in chasing the pleasure he was giving me.

In my fervor to experience all sensations, I slid down his body, accidentally brushing against his hardness. He moaned, the sound deep and rumbling. My grin was pure wicked delight. I repeated the motion and air hissed through his teeth. His kisses turned ravenous.

I steadily rocked up and down on his hand, against him. Heat was building to a crescendo within me, searching for release. His eyes were glazed from his own mounting lust, his fingers still buried inside me. I'd never seen him look out of control before. It only added to my pleasure.

"Emilia—" I silenced him with a kiss. Forget his room. I'd take him here. Now. My hand closed around his arousal and he groaned. "Demon blood, I need to—"

"Take me to bed. *Now*."

The prince of Wrath, who would not be commanded by anyone, submitted to my order.

Without any more taunting or teasing, he magicked us, bodies half-tangled together, to his bedchamber.

TWELVE

Wrath's fingers were still buried between my legs as he leaned us up against the door of his chamber, his breathing coming hard and fast. He'd missed the bedroom. With good reason. My hand remained wrapped around his impressive length. I kept caressing his silky-smooth skin, marveling at the way each stroke had him coming further undone.

It felt a little wrong to feel prideful at the moment, but I certainly adored the fact *I* was the reason the tight leash he kept on himself had finally snapped.

There was no other reason I could imagine he'd transport us into the public corridor connecting our suites. At least the gate closing off this wing was still down, and no one could travel near enough to see us. Nor would they glimpse much of me with Wrath's massive body covering mine. Not that it mattered if they could see me.

I was too lost to the waves of pleasure building and cresting inside me to care where we were, or who was around. I wanted him right here. To hell with the whole Seven Circles. I was not married to Pride yet. Aside from his brief possession of Antonio, I'd never even met him. I doubted the devil would mind my taking a lover before our wicked vows were exchanged.

Ours was certainly not a love match. And if Pride did care, he certainly didn't show it. There was still no letter, no invitation, nor acknowledgment of my arrival. The Prince of Pride was content in his castle alone, and, at the moment, that was more than all right with

me.

Wrath kept kissing me, kept pumping those fingers while rocking against my unwavering grip on him, and I wanted nothing more than to bring this mighty creature to his knees with unrelenting ecstasy. This untethered, wild part of him was almost as intoxicating as his touch.

I'd never experienced something like this, so powerful and right. *He* was right. And I knew, with unending certainty, we were on the precipice of discovering how good we were together. Maybe we were always meant to end up here, lost in each other's passion.

The sound of his pleasure mingling with mine was creating its own spell, and I was so close to shattering, so close to that power that was building and breaking and…

Pain erupted in violent torrents, stealing my breath. Ever in tune with my emotional shifts, Wrath stopped instantly, the euphoric spell broken. "Are you all right?"

"No." I'd never hated a word more. "There's a horrible p-pain."

"Where?" His voice was rough, thick.

"My heart." I let go of him and winced. "Blood and bones. It's bad."

"Come. I'll send for a healer at—"

"I think it's from the Horn of Hades."

Wrath had been reaching for the handle to his room but dropped his hand. His attention shot to the amulet I still wore and he cursed the goddesses impressively.

Everything disintegrated into smoke and glittering black light. I hadn't seen him move, but one moment we were naked outside his bedchamber on the verge of mutual release, and the next we stood, partially dressed, before a scarred wooden door in a tower.

Medieval-looking torches burned brightly on either side of it. I was almost as shocked by our location as I was about the ebony nightgown I now wore. The one that still did little to hide my form. Wrath had on black trousers and nothing else. Except maybe a slight look of concern.

"Where are we?" I reached up to unhook the *cornicello*. The pain was intensifying.

"Don't remove that." It was as if the last few minutes of passion hadn't existed. Wrath was all granite edges and fury again. Except it wasn't directed toward me. He brought his fist to the wood and pounded hard enough to rattle the iron hinges, his voice pure steel. "Matron!"

The next wave of pain made my knees buckle, but I refused to let it pull me under. Even without looking at me, the demon prince missed nothing. His next knock shook a stone loose. I laid a hand on

his arm and gently squeezed. “Wrath.”

“If you do not open this door, I vow on my blood—”

“You’re about to bring the whole tower down with that nonsense, boy.” The door swung open, revealing an older woman with long silver and lavender hair. She wore a deep purple robe with a ropelike belt that reminded me of images of priestesses I’d seen in paintings and books.

Her dark gaze turned to me, assessing.

“Daughter of the Moon, welcome. I am Celestia, the Matron of Curses and Poisons. And I’ve been expecting you.” She stood back and pulled the door wider in welcome. “Come in before his majesty breaks the realm.”

“Next time answer your door faster.”

Wrath stalked into the chamber first, alert and ready for battle. Aside from tinctures, antidotes, and poisons, I wasn’t sure what enemy he expected to find here, but I was in too much pain to worry. I followed him inside and paused. The circular room was composed of dark wood, cool stone, and shelves that climbed all the way up the tower. A ladder leaned against one section as if the matron had been cataloging items on the highest shelves when interrupted. An eclectic mixture of scents wafted around, mingling into something enjoyable.

I could scarcely take a deep breath and the scent, appealing as it was, was beginning to turn my stomach. Sweat beaded my brow as I forced air in and out through clenched teeth. To avoid focusing on the growing nausea, I let my gaze drift around the space.

On a long table near a lone arched window were several vials of strange liquids: some smoking, some bubbling, others tapping against the thin glass as if testing an escape route. Sentient liquid was something new to me and more than a little unnerving.

One shelf had full-grown plants and seedlings and dried petals and herbs. There were poultices and charms, cauldrons, carved figurines of creatures like chimeras and winged deities and gods. Stones, both rough and smooth, and—if the dark sap was any indication—poison-tipped blades and needles glinting in the flickering firelight.

Fat candles dripped wax onto a wooden mantel above a generous fireplace near the center of the room, and incense sticks burned in neat plumes.

It seemed as if the Matron of Curses and Poisons was stocked for any devious pursuit.

I swallowed hard as the next wave of pain lashed through me. It felt as if my body was suddenly in the midst of a brutal war with itself. Whatever was causing the pain was winning.

With a strong hand on my back, Wrath guided me to a little wooden stool and turned on the matron. “Do something. Now.”

She clucked her tongue as she slowly crossed the room. “Demands and threats belong to the scared and weak. Neither trait suits you, so hush.”

“Don’t test me.”

Celestia went to a container filled with scissors and shears. Some had gold or silver handles, others were made of gleaming gemstones or dull bones from mortals or creatures from the underworld. I didn’t look too closely.

Wrath, however, loomed over her supplies. “Move faster.”

“I don’t interfere in your work, boy, don’t intrude on mine. Now stop hovering and sit, or get out and work that anger off elsewhere.” Her cold gaze turned to his. “Do it for her sake, not mine.”

Wrath didn’t leave, or sit, or comment further, but he did give the matron space to work. I decided I liked this fearless woman and wondered who she was to Wrath. Surely she had to know he’d just cut out a tongue. At the moment, the demon prince was especially ferocious, and she paid him no mind. I doubted very many were brave enough to turn their back on him, especially while his power was striking around like an angry viper the way it currently was.

I wasn’t complaining, though. In his own boorish way, he was watching out for me.

She picked up a pair of slim gold scissors with handles shaped like bird wings, then took a pitcher full of sparkling cerulean liquid, a vial of dried herbs, and chose another jar filled with petals in shades of frosty blue and silver. She brought everything over to her worktable, pulled a wooden bowl from a cabinet followed by a mortar and pestle.

After looking everything over one last time, she turned those ancient eyes on me. “I must take a lock of your hair for the tincture.”

“No.” Panic overtook me, and the word was out of my mouth before I realized I’d given a fear away to a stranger. Nonna’s warnings rang in my ears. We were always told to burn our hair and nail clippings, rather than allow anyone an opportunity to use the dark arts on us. “Is it necessary? The pain is already ebbing. I think his highness might have overreacted.”

Her gaze softened. “You have nothing to fear from me, child. You will drink the tincture in its entirety. Then we’ll burn the bowl. Nothing will remain for those who wish you harm.”

I felt Wrath’s attention on me like two hot pokers at the base of my neck but refused to look to him. This was my decision and mine alone. I took a deep breath and nodded. “All right.”

Celestia clipped a small portion of my hair, sprinkled it over one part herbs and two part petals. She mashed everything together with the mortar and pestle until it formed a powder.

Once the consistency was to her liking, she whispered a charm in

a tongue I didn't know, then added a few splashes of the sparkling blue liquid to the mixture.

She poured everything into a silver chalice etched with runes and stirred vigorously. "It won't be the most pleasant drink, but the Tears of Saylonia will help with the taste."

"Tears of Saylonia?"

"Some say she's the goddess of grief and sorrow. But there's more to her than that. The tears are gathered at a temple in the Shifting Isles."

"Where are they located? Here?"

She slid her attention to the prince as she stirred the drink in the opposite direction, the contents splashing from the sudden shift. "It's almost ready."

Wrath watched every step the matron made toward me with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. As if one wrong movement would signal the fight he'd been primed for.

I ignored his odd behavior and returned my attention to the approaching woman. "I've worn the amulet for decades, and I've never experienced pain like that before."

"You visited the Crescent Shallows, did you not?"

"Yes." My hair was damp and there was little use in lying. "How could you tell?"

"A good guess. Certain magic cannot enter those waters without grave consequences. Some say the water there once belonged to the goddesses and burns away that which doesn't belong. Others believe the Feared seek to reclaim what was taken from them. And they do not care how they succeed in restoring their power, only that they do. Vengeance is a brutal pursuit."

"The Feared?" I searched my memory for any stories or legends from childhood, but the name was unfamiliar. "Is that what you call the goddesses, or the demon princes?"

"Enough." Wrath's voice was quiet, but his tone brooked no room for argument. "Some would be wise to keep superstitions and old folktales to themselves." He folded his arms against his chest, his expression hard. "Is her tincture finished?"

I glanced down at the devil's horn charm. Wrath had told me to leave it on. I gave him an accusing look. "You neglected to tell me about any of the dangers. Now you're concerned?"

Celestia narrowed her eyes, but didn't speak for another few moments as she continued stirring the tincture. "If he knew the effect it would have on you, I doubt he would have taken you there. It's his other secret you need to inquire about. He is fully aware of how *that* one affects you both. And yet he hasn't uttered a single word. I wonder why that is? Perhaps we've finally found your Achilles' heel,

your majesty."

Wrath went preternaturally still. The temperature in the room plummeted enough for me to see my breath. Jars rattled as the shelves shook from the force of the power he was holding back, the temper he was battling. The matron had clearly struck her intended target.

Intrigued even more by his response, I studied him closely. He was almost unrecognizable. There was no outward shift in his cold features, but I sensed the immense wave of magic he drew in like the tide.

"Careful," he warned. "You're treading on dangerous ground."

"Bah." She waved her hand at him, completely unconcerned with the growing hum of anger in the air. She handed me the chalice and motioned for me to drink.

I raked my attention over Wrath, and whatever had ignited his namesake sin vanished when he met my worried stare. The temperature returned to normal. He nodded at the cup. "It's all right. Drink."

I brought the concoction to my lips and halted. The smell was not even remotely pleasant. I steeled myself before the pain returned and downed it all in one gulp, ignoring the saccharine yet bitter herb taste. My symptoms vanished.

"You're all set, child."

I gave her the chalice back and watched as she tossed the wooden bowl into the flames. It burned to ash within mere seconds. "Should I take off the amulet now?"

She looked to Wrath, one silver brow raised. I didn't swing around in time to see his reaction, but the matron pursed her lips. Her focus darted to my neck before she met my eyes again. "No. The *charm* won't trouble you anymore."

"Watch yourself, Celestia."

"Go swing a sword or toss a fist at another chunk of rock and begone. Did you not think I heard about your grand show of temper? Domitius and Makaden are fools. But only a larger fool would act as you did. Some might think new sins are stirring. You ought to be mindful, *your highness*. Others are watching. And they take particular interest in your court."

"Mind what you say." His fury whipped around like the gusting winds of a storm. She smiled, but it wasn't the kind of loving expression a grandmother would give to her grandchild. It was edged in steel. Wrath's expression was worse. "I don't take orders from you."

"Then consider it a suggestion. Regardless, it's irresponsible to not tell her."

"Yes, I should very much like to know what you're both talking about." Now that my pain was gone, I was getting annoyed. I knew

Wrath was still keeping secrets. Secrets that even Celestia felt I had the right to know. And after what just happened between us in the shallows, I wouldn't tolerate them anymore. I gave Wrath a pointed look. "Someone needs to answer my question. Now."

Celestia glanced between us. "This is a conversation best carried out between you two. Alone." This time her grin was pure trouble. "Though you may want to take her to the Temple of Fury, far from where you can be overheard. I have a feeling you two will wake the entire castle."

With that she ushered us out of her chamber of tinctures and slammed the old oak door at our backs. I stared at the prince. One way or another, he would tell me the truth. I couldn't fathom how Celestia knew his secret when I didn't, and my annoyance was giving way to anger. And that emotion was not brought on by this House of Sin.

How many others in his court were privy to the information he kept from me, that pertained *to* me? It was unacceptable that I was the only one kept in the dark.

"I want the truth. No more lies. You owe me that much."

He seemed to be very much on the verge of finding a weapon to swing. Though his frustration didn't appear to be directed at me or even the matron.

Perhaps he was angry with himself. Whatever game or scheme he'd been planning was clearly over. And hadn't played out the way he'd hoped it would.

"Fuck." Wrath shoved a hand through his hair and paced away from me. "I thought we'd have more time. But after tonight, it obviously can no longer wait."

Wrath brought us to his personal library and magicked the room to contain our voices within it. I stood before the giant fireplace, warming my hands. Between the cool temperature in the castle, the exhaustion that swept in following the pain, my thin nightgown, and the dampness of my hair, I was chilled to the core.

Fear was also playing a role with my shudders. Was it possible something happened to my family? If they were harmed—or worse—I wasn't sure Wrath would tell me.

He knew they were my weakness as much as my strength and I'd bargain my way back to my world and break the contract with Pride. That would certainly complicate his mission and be motive enough for

his not being forthright with me.

Wrath's tense mood wasn't helping to soothe me, either. It invaded my senses until my own nerves were yanked taut enough to snap.

He paced the room like a large animal trapped in a cage. Prior to our passionate embrace in the lagoon, and then in the corridor outside his bedchamber, I'd never seen him anything but calm; even while furious he was never so… on edge. It was disconcerting, seeing him like this. His snapping at the matron was unusual, too. On occasion he could be gruff, arrogant, or brimming with masculine smugness, but he was never rude.

"Will you sit down?" I rubbed at my arms. "You're making me nervous."

He prowled over to his desk and poured two fingers of lavender liquid into his glass. He tossed it back before swiftly refilling it and offered the second drink to me. I shook my head.

Waiting was unbearable. And my stomach was already tied up in several intricate knots. I wanted to know what he had to say, and why whatever it was was affecting him this strongly. Even when he attacked Makaden earlier there had been no regret or worry on his part. Only cold efficiency. He'd carried out a sentence and was impartial to its brutality.

"Is the suspense truly necessary?" My voice was surprisingly calm. It was a complete contradiction to the frantic pounding of my heart. "Whatever you have to say can't be that bad."

I hoped.

He finally stopped moving long enough to look me in the eye. His expression was impossible to read. A cool, unnerving calm had settled over him. Trepidation slid down my spine. His demeanor reminded me of when a midwife delivered fatal news.

"Earlier this evening, you asked why I Marked you. I'm not sure you fully understand what it does. Why it is something given so rarely."

I stared at him, momentarily taken off guard by his sudden shift in topic and how the summoning Mark played a role in this. At least I understood how Celestia had known about this secret; her attention had briefly shifted to my neck. I'd mistakenly thought she was looking at my devil's horn charm.

"Well?" he prodded, drawing my attention back to him. "What do you know of it?"

"Nonna said it allows someone to summon a prince of Hell without an object that belongs to them. That it's a great honor not many are given. And that, as long as he draws breath, the demon prince must always answer the summoning. Except, of course, when I

tried to summon you and you didn't show." My tone turned frosty. "I thought you were dead."

He stepped back, his focus quickly roving over me in quiet calculation.

"After being injured with Envy's House dagger, I hadn't healed enough to travel between realms. I didn't realize you were upset by my absence." I gave him a dirty look that seemed to bring out a mischievous tilt of his mouth. The look faded almost instantly. "Do you know why it's given so rarely?"

"Because princes are ornery bastards and don't like being summoned at will?"

A ghost of a smile touched his lips again before he banished it. "Because it is a magical bond that can never be broken."

"Impossible. All magic can be undone."

"Not this bond. Not even in death."

"But you are immortal."

"Imagine then, how long that bond lasts."

We stared at each other as the weight of that truth settled between us. I was struggling to absorb the information, the implications of it. Wrath didn't speak, his expression turning grim as I sorted through the shock. If the bond lasted even after death, I couldn't fathom how that worked. Our souls would forever be linked. Except I'd sold mine, and had no clue what that meant for the bond. Or for him.

"Emilia." His voice was quiet, but held a commanding edge. "Say something."

"You said to avoid speaking in absolutes. They have a tendency to *never* stick, remember?"

"Do you recall anything I said the night you were attacked by the Viperidae?"

Wrath moved nearer, watching me carefully with each of his measured steps. I imagined he sensed how close I was to bolting and was doing his best to not make any sudden movements and spook me. His attention strayed to his Mark.

Unconsciously, I reached up to touch the place on my neck where the nearly invisible symbol marred my skin. I'd been in too much pain to absorb anything he'd said that night, and then we were in the bath together and the nightmares had begun soon after.

And before I awoke he'd said…

"I told you to live long enough to hate me. And I meant it." He reached out and traced the side of my throat, his touch featherlight. "That was the night I Marked you. But that's not all."

Panic fluttered inside my rib cage like a trapped bird.

I had a terrible feeling I knew where this was going and I wanted

no part in it. I swore my betrothal tattoo started tingling, reminding me it was there. As if I'd forgotten.

I forced my feet to stay firmly planted on the ground, though a large part of me wanted to take flight and race up to my rooms, lock the door, and never emerge.

"Stop." I turned and started walking away. The new fear was growing. I didn't want to hear any more of his confession. "Take me back to my chamber."

"Not until you know the whole truth."

Wrath now stood before me, his gaze fused to mine. I really despised his supernatural speed. He didn't reach for me again, didn't bar my path or crowd me into a corner, but his expression was laced with the promise of staying close to me until I was ready to hear his full confession. I knew he'd wait for an eternity if he had to, he'd wait until the sun burned out and the last star faded from the heavens. And I didn't have that sort of time to waste.

I finally nodded, granting him permission to continue. To uproot my world once more.

"The magic I used that you'd mistaken for a rebirth spell? It was the Mark. It tethered us, flesh to flesh, in a way that allowed my powers to heal you. You only walked away from that attack because I took the venom into my body through that magical bond."

His immortal body. A body that would not be cut down or ended by poison or venom or anything else that would have killed me. I swallowed hard. Wrath bonded himself to a sworn enemy just so I would live. The gravity of what he'd done. What he'd sacrificed to save me the night I'd gone after my sister's amulet, fought the snakelike Viperidae demon, and had almost died, crashed into me. No wonder he'd been furious I'd been so cavalier about it.

His price had been steeper than I'd ever imagined. But then again, so was mine.

"The Mark was more than a way to summon me, or save you. Because of another magical bond we share, it was also part acceptance. I believe you understand where this story is headed, but would you like me to continue?"

My heart was now beating very fast at his choice of words. *Acceptance*. We weren't talking about his summoning Mark and the magic he used to take the venom anymore. We were talking about my fear, the one that kept growing even now. I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye. "I broke the spell after that."

"You don't sound certain. Yet the truth has always been there for you to see."

I looked down at the traitorous ink on his bare arm; the magical tattoos that hadn't disappeared. I'd suspected my spell reversal hadn't

worked but had pushed those worries aside. He was correct. I hadn't *wanted* to acknowledge what it meant. I still didn't.

"May I?" Wrath reached for my hand but stopped short of touching me. I nodded and he gently took my arm and rolled up the sleeve of my nightdress. He held his forearm to mine, waiting until the truth stopped fluttering around like a frightened bird and settled into me.

There was no denying they matched perfectly. And I knew why.

I dragged my attention from our tattoos up to his face. His beautiful, cold, royal face. The face that belonged to a fallen god. And my destroyer. Anticipation prickled my skin.

"You seek the truth? Allow me to give it freely. Pride has not summoned you to his court, nor will he ever attempt to. At least not for the reason you believe."

"Because…"

I knew, oh goddess, I knew. Still, I needed him to say the words.

"You are not his intended, Emilia." The world beneath me tilted. Wrath's gaze was steady enough to keep both my knees and the realm from quaking. "You are mine."

THIRTEEN

You are mine. Everything outside of those three words faded. My shock, denial, and utter confusion were simply gone. It was as if I'd stepped from Wrath's library back into the nothingness of the void. My pulse pounded in every one of my cells. The phrase echoed softly, drummed against each of my nerves, embedded themselves into my heart.

It felt like the magic that bonded us fully came awake. Wrath's admission somehow wrenched it from its slumber and gave it permission to stretch its arms wide.

This mighty warrior prince, brimming with immortal vitality and power, death and rage made flesh… suddenly, I was drawn into a vision.

Past or future or pure illusion crafted of this sinful world, I couldn't discern. We were in Wrath's bed, hundreds of candles flickering across the glossy surface of his silken sheets, his dark colored walls, and the sheen of sweat coating his bare chest.

I was astride the demon prince, my thighs spread wide to accommodate the breadth of him. He watched me with a primal sort of possession, his half-lidded gaze drinking in every inch of my body while my hips undulated, seeking pleasure but not fully. I teased us both by not quite closing the slight distance between our bodies.

He reached for me, but I pinned him to the mattress, nipping playfully at his mouth before losing myself in his slow kisses. Soon he was no longer content with being a spectator; his hands clasped on to

my sides, guiding me down onto his fierce arousal. With a whispered word of endearment and a quick upward thrust, we were joined in all ways. For eternity.

I managed to draw in a deep, ragged breath, banishing the vision. Some denial slipped back in. "*We* are still betrothed."

Wrath's eyes momentarily glazed, as if he'd been in that seductive illusion with me and still felt the tremors of pleasure rocking through him. His cool tone did not match the heat lingering in his gaze. "Yes. I am to be your husband."

"My husband. You, not Pride."

"Emilia…"

"Please."

I held up a hand to stall him. Something ancient rattled my bones. I ignored the feeling, instead focusing on the anger unfurling in fiery tendrils, replacing any lingering sense of shock or denial, and clearing my head. This could *not* be happening. It was a complication I could ill afford for several reasons; the largest being my vow to avenge my sister.

"You lied to me."

He fell silent for a few moments, then said quietly, "Despite the less-than-ideal circumstances of our union, we are well suited. Enough."

I stared at him, unblinking. With such a *wildly* romantic declaration, who needed love or passion? If I wasn't marrying Pride to carry out my scheme, I was going to marry for love. "Well suited enough" was also grossly misrepresenting the situation. I still wished to strangle Wrath more often than I wished to kiss or bed him. I had a feeling he felt the same way. Which perhaps was an indication of being *well suited enough*. Ours would be an unholy union of fury.

"Your brother is aware of this?"

"Of course."

The demon prince seemed braced for a violent outburst; his feet were subtly planted shoulder-width apart, his body angled forward. He deserved a good slap for keeping this from me, but I could hardly wrap my mind around his confession and the strange way his words—innocuous though they were—suddenly heated my blood.

My whole body hummed with awareness, almost preternaturally. I was aware of every one of his movements, from the slight shifting of his feet to his steady breath. My new awareness of him did not alleviate my anger. If anything, it only stoked it more.

New realizations clicked into place. If I was a member of House Wrath, other royal houses—such as Pride's court—would never share gossip regarding their prince. Any hopes and plans I had of gaining information I needed about Pride's first wife were ruined.

“This is madness.”

I had taken the chaos my world devolved into after Vittoria’s death and had created a tiny semblance of order by coming here. And I’d only accomplished that because of my vow to her.

Now… now my life was once again spinning out of control because of the Wicked.

Wrath in particular. My fury finally exploded.

“You keep telling me I have a choice. When does that actually happen? Certainly not when it comes to which demon House I choose. Or which prince I thought I was betrothed to. Let’s not forget my personal favorite, back in Palermo when I asked if you’d make me come here. To rule in Hell. You said you would never force me. Apparently *tricking* is a perfectly acceptable substitute. Congratulations.” I clapped slowly. “You truly know your way around bending the truth. I must admit, I’m impressed.”

He didn’t look relieved, but he did relax his stance, marginally. I saw the exact moment he recalled the night I was talking about, when I thought I’d broken our betrothal with a spell of un-making. He’d sworn he wouldn’t force me into a marriage or take me to the underworld. Apparently, more half-truths if not full lies.

“You still do. You do not have to complete our marriage.”

I pointed a finger in accusation at the summoning Mark.

“And what about this unbreakable bond? It doesn’t feel like a choice. I realize you had much to sacrifice, too, but at least you were aware of what you were deciding. Regardless, you should have told me before now. I had every right to know.”

“The Mark was the best alternative I could come up with at the time. And thanks to the venom, I didn’t have many other options to explore before it stopped your heart. I asked you to grant me permission to help that night. *There* was your choice. You betrothed us. I accepted.”

As if I needed a reminder of that grievous error. “Alternative to what?”

“To delay certain urges the acceptance creates.”

“Urges.”

My mouth shut with an audible click as understanding sank in. All of my lust-filled thoughts and feelings toward Wrath had slowly been intensifying. They’d been eroding my distrust and the betrayal I had felt. I’d thought it was *only* this realm, its tendency toward desire, fueling my emotions, nudging me toward that almost primal frenzy to bed him. But it wasn’t. It was also an ancient need to claim my husband. To secure our marriage.

Goddess above. *Wrath* was my intended.

I’d been fighting a battle on many fronts and hadn’t even known

it. No wonder resisting temptation had been so hard. I'd been battling the bond, the realm, and its nudges for me to face my fears of owning my sexual desire without guilt or shame.

If I was being honest, the conflicted feelings had started well before we came to this world. When he'd been attacked by Envy and bled out before me, something had shifted then.

And prior to that, when I'd been under Lust's spell, I'd wanted Wrath desperately. For a moment that night, he seemed to want to close the distance between us, too.

I snapped myself into the present. "Your acceptance of the betrothal creates desire?"

"Consummation, along with a traditional ceremony, complete the marriage bond." He searched my face, probably seeing if I was about to hit him now. I wanted to. Tremendously. "You look…"

"Angry?" I raised my brows and canted my head. He was wise enough to know that the silence that followed was twice as dangerous as raising a hand.

"*Create* was a poor word choice. It *encourages* the completion of the bond. At some level, you have to already possess those feelings, or else there'd be nothing for the bond to encourage."

"Has the realm ever been *encouraging* me, or is it only our bond?"

"Both."

"And your summoning Mark does what, exactly?"

"Marking you subdues the marriage urges because it's its own unbreakable link between us. If you were to think of it in terms of a body of water, it would be similar to a river that breaks into two smaller streams. Each diluting the other to an extent, until they rejoin."

Which was why he'd brushed his knuckles across the Mark whenever we kissed; he'd been trying to dilute my *urges*. He also did that while I was under Lust's influence at the bonfire. Which meant he'd been tamping it down for a while. And hadn't bothered to tell me.

I don't know why it stung so badly, but it did.

"What happens if I refuse to accept the marriage? Will I still want you in my bed?"

"The urges will remain, but they won't ever force your hand, Emilia. That's not the way the bond works. You will always have a choice. Just as you would with any other partner."

"I always have a choice," I scoffed. "Except if I want to marry the devil."

Wrath stiffened. The words were out of my mouth before I'd given much thought to them. Or how they might impact the prince. In order for him to experience those urges, too, he must possess some level of

feelings for me.

And that was… it was too complicated to sort through.

I knew it was unfair to blame him, especially since I was the one who'd originally trapped him in a betrothal, but I couldn't help but cling to my fury. All of my plans were going up in flames. If I didn't get to House Pride, I might never discover what really happened to my twin. The only reason I'd even signed that contract was to place myself in the viper's nest and stop any more witches from being murdered.

Now I was in this realm and stuck in a situation that wouldn't further my mission. I didn't come here to find love, or to become Princess of House Wrath. I came for vengeance. I came to be Queen. I was here to destroy the demon who'd killed Vittoria and save my family and island from further danger from invading demons. And Wrath was complicating my entire world.

"Why the secrecy?" I demanded. "If you didn't want me to sign Pride's contract you could have told me about this back in the cave that night. Why not ask me to align myself with your House? It makes no sense that you'd hide this from me."

"Fiancée or not, you are free to join any House of Sin you wish. I won't ever stand in your way. And I did not tell you because I didn't want you to come here."

"Why don't you want me here?" He pressed his lips together. I wasn't about to let him get away with that non-response answer again. "Tell me. Tell me this has something to do with the curse and not with another person you love. I need to understand why you keep some secrets and give up others."

"I cannot. Be content with the answers you've gotten."

I noticed his word choice. *Cannot* and *will not* were vastly different. I looked him over, but his expression gave nothing away. I knew he'd chosen those words with care.

"Is this why I can't travel between the demon courts without an invitation? Because I am technically bound to your House?"

He nodded. "You would still need an escort through the realm since it's dangerous to travel alone, and we'd need to have a delegation from each House meet at the border of our territories, but yes. As my intended you are seen as the future co-ruler of House Wrath. Therefore, it would be an act of aggression if you were to simply show up at another court without warning or permission."

"What of the contract I signed with House Pride?"

"If we complete our marriage, it becomes void."

"And if we don't? What about the witch murders? Are they still happening?"

"No. They are not."

“How is that possible? Your entire mission revolved around finding the devil a bride. Unless it was never truly about that…”

Wrath looked as if he wanted to say more but either couldn’t or wouldn’t. His growing silence solidified my earlier worry about the murders having nothing to do with the devil needing a bride to break his curse. Which meant the witches were killed for some reason I’d yet to uncover. Annoyance warred with anger as I glared at the prince of secrets.

“If you choose to do nothing,” he finally said, breaking the silence, “then it will eventually be sent to the Temple of Fate. A council of three will then convene on the matter. That path is ill-advised, but is your choice to make nonetheless.”

“Wonderful. The council will what? Decide then if I marry you or someone else?”

“They will decide the fate of us all.”

I regretted not accepting the drink he’d offered earlier. I rolled my head, trying to ease the mounting tension. There were way too many emotions fighting for dominance right now. Wrath walked over to where I stood and put the glass in my hand, then began circling the room.

“How did you know I wanted the drink? Can you sense my emotions that clearly, or is it an added bonus from our betrothal bond? Or maybe the summoning Mark. It’s hard to keep all of your tricks straight.”

“Your gaze darted to the glass, Emilia. I simply read your body language.”

I watched him pace, my mind spinning with each of his revolutions around the room. His actions were all starting to make sense. He hadn’t let me die from the elements because I was his future bride. It was also why he’d stayed with me in the Sin Corridor, though Anir said he shouldn’t have. Another memory came back to me. In Palermo, Anir had mentioned completing the marriage bond and securing his House, something about gaining full power. When he’d come to collect me in the cave, I’d noticed a shift in his power. It had felt infinite. Stronger.

Wrath may have *some* feelings or physical attraction for me, but, given his nature, I wondered if he’d acted partly out of self-preservation.

“Do your subjects know?”

“Yes. The whole realm is aware.”

Which was why he’d made such a public example of Lord Makaden. The noble hadn’t simply disobeyed a royal command; he’d challenged Wrath and insulted his soon-to-be wife. The same was true for the officer he’d brought the mountain down on; he’d threatened to

kill the princess of House Wrath. If either of them harmed me, it would in turn diminish Wrath's power to some degree. I knew precisely how much princes of Hell coveted power.

Enough to bind themselves to someone they may enjoy between their sheets on occasion, but would never truly love. For eternity.

Well suited enough.

The choice of words grated on me. He also hadn't denied there was someone else in his life. Someone he'd chosen before I destroyed his world.

"I invited you to bed tonight." My voice was low, but not meek. Wrath stopped pacing and his heavy gaze clashed with mine. My attention roved over his face. "Would you have told me any of this before we slept together?"

"No matter how tempting, I would not have consummated our marriage tonight. There are plenty of ways to give and receive pleasure that would not jeopardize your free will."

"Is that the truth? Or just what you think I wish to hear?"

He stared at me, his jaw tightening. The temperature around us chilled a few degrees. I half-expected the castle's foundation to shake. "What kind of monster do you believe me to be?"

I had no good answer. And until I did… I drew in a deep breath, thinking over my options. Wrath had mentioned a few of his brothers were interested in hosting me at their Houses. Perhaps it was time for a visit.

"I want you to escort me to House Envy in the morning. Will you send a note letting him know I accept his invitation?"

Wrath didn't react for a long moment; he looked like he wasn't sure if he'd heard me correctly. He stared so hard I started to worry he could see through flesh and bone straight into my soul. I kept my expression bland and forced thoughts of tranquility: collecting shells by the sea, laughing with my sister and Claudia, drinking wine and talking about simple things.

Anything to keep my emotions from betraying me.

He finally nodded. He wasn't pleased, that much was obvious from the way he'd tensed up at the request, but he also wasn't trying to stop or imprison me.

I was not his cosseted princess. Thus far, my choices remained my own.

"You're certain that's what you want? Even after what Envy did?"

"Yes." I thought about my next request. "I also need a mending kit."

"You don't need to sew your own clothing anymore, Emilia. A seamstress can do that."

"All the same, I'd like one for emergencies."

“Very well. I’ll have one sent to your room and let my brother know tonight. Will that be all?”

“For now.”

“Come.” He offered his hand, his voice and expression both genial enough to make me wary as I stepped closer. I ignored the little spark that passed between us when his fingers closed around mine. If he felt it, too, he didn’t let on. “I’ll take you to your chamber to pack. We’ll leave for House Envy at first light.”

FOURTEEN

Wrath made one small, seemingly innocuous request of his own before leaving me to pack a trunk for my visit. He'd asked to have a gown sent in the morning, one in which it was appropriate to be received by a prince of Hell. Regardless of any ulterior motives, of which I was certain he had many, I'd decided there was little harm in granting his wish and quickly agreed.

I told myself my swift acceptance had *nothing* to do with the fact my *betrothed* was in my private suite, standing shirtless near my bed, looking like he was carved from the very essence of temptation itself. He kept a careful distance, almost painfully so, but there wasn't anything he could do to dampen my awareness of him. The space between us seemed to vibrate with both tension and anticipation. I wasn't sure if it was only coming from me, or if he felt it, too. He'd retreated back to the enigmatic prince who was cordial, but otherwise difficult to read.

I was not nearly as calm. My emotions were still aflutter after learning the truth, and I had every right to tuck myself safely in denial until I sorted through them. Far away from the prince.

The twinkle of mirth finally broke into his cool features as I ushered him out of my rooms and practically shut the door on his heels. I leaned my head against the wall and exhaled. An hour earlier I'd felt much differently. I couldn't get him *into* my bed fast enough.

I slammed the memory of our romantic encounter outside his rooms from my mind. Recalling the pleasant sensation of his hands

stroking and exploring would do nothing to clear my head.

"What a nightmare."

I rushed into my bathing chamber to splash water on my face and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, immediately understanding his amused reaction. My dark eyes were wide and wild, my hair unruly from our earlier dip into trouble, and my skin was flushed as if some torturous fever had overtaken me. I was an untamed, frenzied mess on the inside and it was shining through to the outside. Certainly not the ideal reaction to matrimony to boost any male ego or confidence. Though it wasn't as if Wrath lacked in either of those areas.

My gaze snagged on my amulet, briefly wrenching me from thoughts of husbands and wives and unbreakable magical bonds. Given Envy's reaction to the Horn of Hades last time, I wanted the necklace far away from him. I refused to take any careless chances by parading it under his nose while staying in his royal House.

I took it off and placed it at the bottom of my vanity drawer. I'd let Wrath know where to find it in the morning. As I closed the drawer, I noticed something that hadn't been present earlier: a silver hand mirror and matching brush and comb were placed atop the table.

They appeared sometime after I'd cleaned up from Lord Makaden's blood and now. I admired the detailed etching, marveling at the craftsmanship. Another beautiful—and thoughtful—gift from my future husband. I sighed. If Wrath started wooing me, I wasn't sure I'd recall all the reasons we weren't a proper match. Of which there were many.

First, he was a prince of Hell, a mortal enemy to witches. Next, he was secretive and did not trust me any more than I trusted him with full disclosure. He also might feel lust around me, but that did not equal love. I wanted a true partner, an equal and confidant. Wrath would always hold his proverbial cards close, and I wasn't sure he'd ever deal me in. Given the tenuous nature of our current relationship, I might never fully include him in my plans, either.

I removed the animal skulls and flower clips from around the crown of my head, then ran the comb through my loose curls, trying desperately to slow my pulse. It was no use.

I set the comb down and returned to my bedchamber, pacing so quickly around the room I almost worked up a sweat, too wound up to attempt sleep. As appealing as shoving my feelings aside was, I needed to sort through some of the tangle before I left for Envy's House.

Wrath was a handsome, unwed prince, and he was no doubt highly sought after by all eligible ladies of the nobility. He was a bit aloof at times, and arrogant, but he was also charming and flirtatious

when he wished to be. He'd once even called himself "His Royal Highness of Undeniable Desire." And, goddess curse him, I could see how that was true. If he set his attention on someone, I doubted they would resist his romantic pursuit for long.

He approached everything strategically and it would only be a matter of time before the object of his desire happily surrendered to his careful seduction. He'd certainly been a generous lover in the Crescent Shallows, focusing on my needs as if that gave him ultimate pleasure to do so. In fact, I imagined he had his pick of all-too-willing bed partners before I entered his world. Some vying for his throne and power, others solely interested in his body.

I abruptly stopped pacing as another thought occurred to me, one that pricked like the little spikes on a crab shell when we served those at our trattoria. I'd thought of it earlier, and now it seemed to taunt me with larger implications.

Wrath hadn't professed love or affection, only that we were well suited enough. While it wasn't the romantic moment of my dreams, there was truth in his statement.

I knew him enough to know he would never force me into anything or interfere with my free will, and at least I wouldn't be tied to the devil. But I couldn't stop myself from wondering if there was someone else *he'd* prefer to wed. Before I'd accidentally summoned him and betrothed us, it was possible there had been someone in his bed and his heart.

Someone he might be thinking of now. When we first met, he'd made it abundantly clear how much he hated witches. Even if his feelings for me were thawing, it might not ever be enough for him to truly love me. Would he keep a mistress if we completed our marriage bond?

I didn't like the pinch of discomfort that came with those thoughts.

No matter how hard I tried to quiet my brain, I couldn't stop thinking of our passionate encounter in the lagoon and then outside his bedchamber. His hands on my body, my back pressed against the wall, his tongue claiming mine… in those moments he *felt* right.

But that didn't mean he was. For a multitude of reasons. Passion and lust couldn't erase the lack of trust between us or the secrets we both kept. A good relationship was built on a solid foundation of honesty, and I didn't even know his true name.

Aside from the real possibility of Wrath never fully allowing himself to love me, I was unsure if I could ever fully allow myself to love him. Bed him, certainly. Marry, perhaps. But to let go of everything else and accept him as he was, with all of his secrets? I wasn't as sure.

“Goddess help me.” This was disastrous.

I’d been willing to have a marriage of convenience with Pride. But only because it granted me access to his House and a better understanding of how his wife’s murder might tie in with Vittoria’s. Binding myself to Wrath… I was unsure how that would assist in my mission.

If anything, all I came up with were more complications.

I tossed myself across the bed and summoned Source. My magic responded almost instantly, happy to be used while I was otherwise distracted. I created a garden’s worth of rose-gold burning flowers and floated them up to the ceiling, my mind returning to the two princes currently occupying the majority of my thoughts.

I didn’t know the first thing about Pride, other than the fact he was the devil. Wrath I was starting to know a little better, and being near him sometimes made the ache in my chest lessen. He didn’t erase memories of my twin—no one could ever do that—but when he was around, I found a perverse sense of peace arguing with him.

I released the hold on my magic, the flowers of flame slowly burning out. I watched as the petals became blackened embers that floated to the floor, extinguishing before they touched the carpet. I sighed, too distraught to be thrilled over my most impressive use of magic yet. It wasn’t the marriage bond that bothered me; it was the realization that my family hadn’t managed to drag me from the depths of my grief, but the demon prince had.

Some days I hated him for it, but there was a larger part of me that was grateful for his unwillingness to tolerate my fire burning out. He’d poke and prod and taunt me until I wanted nothing more than to wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze. And it was far better to be angry rather than turn into a ghost of my former self from sadness and grief.

It had been a very long, restless night and this realm did nothing to ease my way as I cycled through emotions. Twice I’d gotten up, made it to the outer door, my hand hovering above the knob, then shook sense into myself and returned to bed.

I was here to find out the truth about my twin. The more I thought of Vittoria, the easier it became to distance myself from those other *urges*. And when those thoughts weren’t enough, I continued to delve into Source, creating a variety of flaming flowers in various sizes. I practiced extinguishing some flowers, while increasing the intensity of the flames on others.

When the gown arrived just before dawn, along with the olive branch ring Wrath had given me back in the mortal world, I’d been bleary-eyed opening the package, but pleased. It was solid black lace, with long fitted sleeves and a full skirt, but it wasn’t entirely modest.

The sides were cut out from just under the upper part of my ribs to my waist.

Those open edges were lined with shimmering gold designs that reminded me of flowering vines. Snakes also twisted through the flora.

Temptation was what the dress should have been called if garments were given names.

Now, as we stepped into the dark emerald–colored antechamber outside Envy's throne room, amidst a sea of waiting nobles clad in various shades of deep green silks and velvets, it was not lost on anyone that Wrath had chosen my clothing with greater purpose.

His perfectly tailored suit was the masculine version of my gown. Black jacket, black and gold waistcoat with that same floral and snake design, black shirt, and matching trousers. Gold rings glinted from his knuckles, looking more weaponlike than mere ornamentation. His crown was made of gold laurel leaf intertwined with glittering ebony serpents.

I wore no diadem or tiara, but Wrath had dressed me in his signature black and gold. It was his way of showing this court where I truly belonged. At *his* side.

Judging from the whispers and curious glances that kept sliding our way after the herald rushed in to prepare for our announcement, Wrath's plan had worked.

Truthfully, I'd been onto his scheme the moment I took the gown out of its dark tissue wrapping. My prince was not as subtle as he imagined. Or maybe he hadn't been aiming for subtlety at all. The last time he'd seen Envy, his brother had disemboweled him. Maybe this act of possession had more to do with whatever private feud was happening between them.

Though it was possible it was also Wrath's way of ensuring anyone of this court would think twice before striking me. He was protecting his potential power enhancement *and* irking his brother. I was certain there was also some deep sense of chivalry at play, too.

Wrath did not want harm to befall me. I knew that, more than anything else, was the real driving force behind his actions. *That* was why I'd stepped into the gown that claimed me as part of his royal House as much as our magical tattoos and his royal Mark did.

He was extending his protection, and only a fool would turn that away. I may have been foolish before, but, thank the goddess, I was learning quickly.

The herald nodded at two guards stationed at the double doors, then stomped an emerald-tipped staff on the ground. The doors swung open, revealing my first glimpse inside Envy's royal court. Hunter green marble floors spanned the cathedral-like room with rows of matching columns on either side of a long aisle. Groups of finely

dressed royals stood in small circles throughout the space, their attention riveted on the herald.

And the two people standing behind him, awaiting our introductions.

Wrath paid them no notice, though I suspected he'd already mapped out the exits and placement of guards. Right now the general of war was hidden beneath the cold prince. Arrogance dripped from him as if he'd expected this court's regard and was unsurprised by it.

I looked past the crowd, ignoring their stares until my attention landed on the dais. The Prince of Envy sprawled on his throne, his expression one of complete disinterest. He looked as if there were a hundred other more interesting places he'd rather be, and a hundred other people he'd rather be associating with. It had to be an act. Surely he sensed his brother. And the wave of unease rippling through the room.

After a pregnant pause to eke out the most dramatic effect, the herald's voice broke the silence, "His Royal Highness, Prince Wrath of House Wrath, General of War and one of the Seven, and Lady Emilia di Carlo of House Wrath."

I didn't think it was possible for the room to grow any quieter, but it did. Whispers ceased. Shuffling feet froze. It was as if the whole court had turned to stone. Except for their prince. The moment we were announced, Envy straightened. That indolent expression was replaced with shrewd interest as we slowly made our way down the aisle. I studied him as closely.

He wore a velvet swallowtail jacket the color of an evergreen forest with a jeweled silver crown. His jet-black hair was different from the last time I'd seen him. It was shorter on the sides and a bit longer on top. The new style showed off the harsh lines and angles of his face, the cheekbones that were sharp enough to carve open a few hearts. His facial hair was also mostly gone, except for a slight shadow that only served to enhance his rugged appeal.

If I didn't know what sort of ruthless monster lurked beneath his skin, I'd be lured into those mesmerizing features.

I tried not to let trepidation show as his unnaturally green eyes skipped over his brother and fastened to my face. Envy had kidnapped my family and then harmed Wrath in his pursuit to get the Horn of Hades. I did not have to like or trust him while visiting.

I only needed to use him for my gain.

"Brother. I see you've brought your shadow witch." His expression was once again bored, though I swore his lips twitched slightly at the edges as Wrath tensed beside me. "I didn't think you'd wish to share. But you've certainly dressed her in the most appealing way. All that skin begs to be worshipped. It's about time I found religion, wouldn't

you say?"

It was only because of my need to secure information that I held my tongue.

"Your manners seem to have disappeared along with the length of your hair." Wrath gently squeezed my hand. "Lady Emilia graciously accepted your invitation. I would have advised her to burn it and send back the ashes. Along with a steaming pile of hellhound shit."

"Yes, well, you never were one for subtlety. Leave the *lady* and get out."

"I will see her to her chamber before I depart."

"No."

A slow, threatening grin spread across Wrath's face. "That wasn't a request. I *will* escort her to her chamber. Then I will depart."

Tension descended like an army between the two brothers, poised and ready to strike. I didn't dare glance behind us, but I heard the swish of skirts moving across the floor as if members of the court were putting plenty of distance between themselves and the two royals.

I wondered how often they might fight and if they used magic or weapons or both.

Neither prince broke the other's stare and I all but rolled my eyes as they continued to glower. Another moment and they'd undo the stays on their trousers and compare lengths.

Envy finally sat back, his gloved fingers drumming the arms of his throne. His attention slid between me and his brother, and that taunting half-smirk returned.

"Very well. If it'll get you out of here faster, I'll allow it." He jerked his chin toward a silver-haired servant waiting nearby. The demon immediately stepped forward, eager to please his prince. "Show my brother and his plaything to her private quarters. If he's not gone within a quarter of an hour, use force. My hospitality and good graces toward House Wrath only stretch so far. For every minute he stays over the time allotted, I will plot something creative to do to his precious enchantress."

I subtly watched Wrath from the corner of my eye. This time he didn't rise to Envy's bait. He offered a slight incline of his head, then turned his back on his sibling. Which I quickly realized was, quite possibly, the biggest show of blatant disregard he could offer.

His action deemed Envy unworthy of his fear. I could practically hear the Prince of Envy's molars grinding together as we walked away.

Honestly, I was surprised he hadn't put up more of a fight. Wrath had come into another demon court and no one seemed shocked by his demands. Or their prince's fairly swift acceptance of them. Maybe Wrath's reputation and role as general made them wary.

He placed my hand on his arm as we made our way back out of the throne room and followed the servant up a wide, grand staircase.

Envy's castle was mostly decorated in silvers and greens with splashes of black and white. We traveled over checkerboard tile and I smiled to myself as I took in the floor's design. His guests were merely chess pieces moving along the finely appointed corridors, meant to invoke feelings of envy. From the many shades of green to the riches on display, all played into the sin this House was governed by.

Marble statues lined each side of the gilded corridor, but I didn't give them more than a cursory glance. I did not want to inadvertently succumb to feelings of jealousy over the bounty of beautiful art. Wrath hadn't adjusted the pressure of his grip, but I sensed the tension pouring off him the farther we went into his brother's stronghold.

The next landing broke off into two wings and we were ushered to the right.

The servant stopped before a door near the end and bowed. "The lady's suite. Her trunk is already inside. Will you be needing anything else?" Wrath shook his head. The servant exhaled and turned his attention back to me. "Ring the bell if you need anything."

Before Wrath could scare the demon, I gave him a warm smile. "Thank you."

The servant froze for a moment, then nodded once and quickly disappeared down the corridor we'd just come from. Wrath watched him go before turning back to me. "The staff doesn't expect to be thanked for doing their job."

"Everyone who's working or providing service that's a comfort ought to be thanked."

Wrath looked me over, his expression inscrutable, before he swept through the chambers I'd been appointed. His attention landed on every nook, cranny, and speck of dust as if he expected some nefarious creature to spring forth and attack.

Or maybe he was put off by all of the green and silver tones.

I trailed after him, trying to keep my lips from curving upward as he peered beneath the canopy bed, then yanked back the curtains and rattled the windows. He barged into my bathing chamber, hand on the hilt of his dagger, his expression fierce. prince of Hell or personal guard. It was hard to distinguish who he was as he tended to my suite.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing as he plucked up a pitcher, shook it a little, and brought it close to his nose. I doubted Envy slipped poison into it, but Wrath was not taking any chances.

He caught my eye and turned that fierce glare on me. "Do you find me amusing?"

"At the moment? Very."

He tossed the pitcher aside and stalked toward me, his movements

slow and deliberate. Here was the predator he barely kept hidden under all the fine clothing. His civilized appearance was simply a mask, a way to hide the truth of his nature. The hunter was now on full display and his new target was set firmly in his sights.

A thrill shot through me before my smile vanished and I scrambled back. He didn't stop his pursuit until the backs of my thighs brushed the bed. He paused then, giving me a chance to escape to the other side. But I didn't move. I stayed where I was.

He took one more step, then halted, offering one final choice before he erased the distance. I could either sit down, or remain standing. Sitting was trouble. Standing was worse. It put us entirely too close. I held my ground.

Wrath now stood near enough that with each of my breaths, my chest brushed against his. Truth be told, I felt anything but afraid. I wet my lips and his gaze darkened.

"What about now?" He angled his face down, his mouth hovering right above mine. "Are you still amused, my lady?"

My pulse raced faster. Judging from the smoldering look in his eyes, he knew perfectly well how I was feeling at the moment. I took a steadying breath and slowly exhaled.

"If I decide to return, do I need to send a request to your House?"

A muscle flickered in his jaw, indicating he'd picked up on my choice of words and wasn't pleased by the possibility I wouldn't return. Instead of arguing, or issuing any sort of arrogant command, Wrath stepped back and took my hand in his, carefully turning it over. He lifted my palm to his lips, pressed a chaste kiss to it, then closed my fingers around it. Heat shot up my arm, warmed my blood, and my body hummed with need. His unexpected tenderness was not helping matters between us become less murky.

"My home is your home, Emilia. You do not need an invitation. When you decide to return, I will send an escort." He motioned to the bed. "Sit. I have something to give you."

My attention shot to his mouth and I quickly wrenched it back up, fighting the realm's sinful magic, our persistent marriage bond, and Wrath's general appeal.

Now was not the time to think about kissing.

He didn't say anything, or smirk, but I almost sensed his pleasure as I worked through my emotions. Deciding he wasn't likely to ravish me here, I perched on the edge of the mattress.

Wrath slowly went to his knees, then lifted my left foot and settled it onto his taut thigh. I went to draw it back, but he held it in place. We both knew I could break his grip if I really wanted to, so I stilled.

"If we decide to consummate our marriage, it will not be in my

brother's home, for mere moments. You deserve better than that." He waited for me to relax, as if that were possible after *that* statement, then began sliding my skirt up. He paused near my bare calf, his gaze locked on to mine. "Trust me."

"Says the prince of lies."

He took the insult in stride. I thought of his tattoo, how actions were more precious to him than words. Trust was something earned, but in order to gain that, I'd need to allow him a place to start. One of us had to take that first step.

I nodded for him to continue and he seemed rooted in place before breaking the spell. Wrath gripped my skirts in his fists and dragged them past my knee and paused with them mid-thigh. Not once did he take his attention from my face, nor did he allow his bare skin to brush across mine. He also made sure that only my left leg was exposed.

"Here." He jerked his chin at my skirts. "Hold them like this."

I took the material from him and watched as he pulled a leather sheath from inside his suit. He removed the slender dagger and held it up for my inspection. Wildflowers were carved into its hilt and the silver blade shined enough to reflect my awe.

"It's gorgeous."

"It will do for now." He placed the dagger back and slipped the leather strap around my thigh, securing the buckle in place. He slipped a finger beneath the strap and glanced up. "Is it too tight?"

"No, it fits perfectly."

"Stand up and walk around just to be certain." He quickly stepped back and averted his attention as I righted my skirts and pushed myself to my feet. I walked around the bedchamber, twisting and turning. "Good?"

"Yes. Thank you. How did you know I was left-handed?"

Wrath glanced down at the weapon now hidden. "You favor the left hand when cutting bread or sipping your wine." Without giving me a chance to respond, he added gruffly, "When you wish to come home, send a missive. I'll return for you."

"I…"

I wasn't sure what to say. If I went back, I didn't know if that would signal my acceptance of our marriage. There was an undeniable attraction between us, but that fire might largely be the result of the magic trying to tempt us together, to literally and figuratively become one. There was no telling if that desire would still burn as brightly if we submitted.

And I had other plans for my life. Like returning to my family. Choosing Wrath would mean the door to my old life would remain closed forever. I might be able to visit my family on occasion, but my

world would fracture even more than it already had. I did not believe true love was ever supposed to steal from a person's life, only enhance it.

"I better get settled in."

The demon prince kept his expression perfectly bland, but I saw the flash of *something* he wasn't quick enough to extinguish flare in his gaze. Before I could say good-bye, he vanished in his glittering black light and smoke, leaving me to the fate I'd chosen.

And my newest scheme.

FIFTEEN

I didn't have long to sit and stew over my decision. Shortly after Wrath left, a servant came with a dress box and a note from the master of this house. In less than an hour, I'd be dining with the prince of this court in his private quarters. Apparently Envy did not want an audience for our meeting. Or perhaps he didn't wish to share his latest "curiosity," as he'd once said.

Nerves buzzed like a swarm of bees trapped in my belly. Envy was ruthless, but I was mostly confident he wouldn't harm me now. Not while I was in this realm and doing so would potentially start a war between House Wrath and House Envy. Being a member of House Wrath certainly had some political perks. I was no longer simply a witch without a royal demon court to protect me. Envy would need to think long and hard before he stuck any dagger in my back.

Logically knowing that didn't ease *all* of my worry, though.

It was hard to push aside the night he'd held my parents hostage and then commandeered our house. I still couldn't believe Nonna had banished him back to the underworld using magic I was unaware she possessed. That swirling vortex was one of the strangest things I'd ever seen.

I shoved those memories away and focused on the here and now. I recalled what Wrath had said about victors and victims. Tonight I would be victorious. I was here to get information.

And I would do everything in my power to succeed. If I had to don the attire of my enemy, so be it. It was an extremely small price

to pay. I'd wear his silly dress and bat my lashes, all while counting down the moments until I got what I was truly after.

"Let's see what dress you've chosen, Prince of Jealousy."

I opened the box and rolled my eyes. The gown was gorgeous, a hunter green velvet that was dark enough to almost be mistaken for black, with long fitted sleeves, a snug bodice that plunged open almost to my navel, and flowing skirts.

A single emerald the size of a robin's egg was fastened onto a sparkling silver chain. The outrageously opulent necklace was likely a pretty weapon Envy wished for me to use against his brother. I could picture Wrath's expression shuttering when he spied the gift that belonged to House Envy glittering on my chest.

Apparently, pissing contests were not simply an idiotic mortal pastime.

I thought about staying in my current dress but figured Envy might be more amenable to sharing information if he wasn't scowling at the offensive House Wrath attire. And I also did not wish to sink to their level of ridiculous royal posturing.

After I slipped on the gown and rolled up the sleeves to show off my forearms, I dabbed some rouge across my cheekbones and lips. I picked up the necklace. The gemstone was flawless; I would no doubt become the envy of anyone who saw it.

I managed to clasp it around my neck when a servant entered my chamber.

"If you're ready, I'll show you to dinner, Lady Emilia."

I'd been hoping for a few moments alone to practice summoning my magic just in case things went very wrong, but even a few hours wouldn't feel like enough time to overcome years of training I'd missed. I smiled at the servant. "Please, lead the way."

As I moved toward the door, I caught my reflection in an oversized mirror. I looked ready to do battle in the most elegant, vicious way. I truly was turning into a princess of Hell.

Goddess help the demons.

We traveled down the opposite end of the corridor where my suite was located. Unsurprisingly, Envy had situated me in the royal wing. Better to keep one's enemies close, and one's future sister-in-law closer. I wondered if that was one of the reasons for Wrath's foul mood. The brothers clearly enjoyed digging at each other as often as possible. Though they would need to find something else to fight over. Magical bond or not, I belonged only to myself.

A stoic guard inclined his head, then stepped back and opened the door. An expansive room spread out before me, mostly dressed in darkness. It was meant to unnerve.

But there was little for me to fear in the shadows. Soon they

would do *my* bidding.

I stepped inside and paused to fully evaluate the room as the door snicked shut behind me. It was not quite a study, nor was it a formal dining room. If we were in the mortal world, it would be similar to a gentleman's club often described in my favorite romance novels.

A circular table with two chairs was placed near a wall of windows, offering a bit of soft light to filter in. Tapers in an impressive silver candelabra were lit on the table, and a few sconces in the farthest corners also added hints of warm light.

Most of the chamber was cast in shadows, including the door where I stood. I glanced up. The tray ceiling was adorned with a fresco: winged beings on clouds, some bright, others stormy.

My gaze traveled around the room and stopped on the shadowy figure of the prince. Envy lounged in an oversized velvet chair near a darkened corner, a glass of amber liquid in one hand. One long leg was kicked up, his ankle resting on a knee. He couldn't look more comfortable or relaxed if he tried. Though his grip indicated he was not as at ease as he'd like me to believe.

He took a long sip of his drink, his gaze hidden from view, but I felt it travel over me all the same. "You certainly know how to stir up trouble, pet."

I remained in the shadows. "I may have claws, your highness, but I assure you I am no one's pet. Least of all yours."

Envy leaned forward into a pool of candlelight and somehow, even while seated, managed to look down his regal nose at me. His beautifully harsh features were set into an unimpressed frown. "Thank the devils for that. I don't share what's mine."

"Keeping lovers through force is nothing to boast about."

"Choice is appealing, force is not. Might does not always make right. Unless my bedmate asks nicely." His gaze raked over me, and I wondered how well he could see into the shadows. "I take it you've accepted my invitation to play with envious emotions."

"Don't you enjoy inspiring envy?"

"Coming here to make my brother jealous does nothing for *me*." He set his glass on a low table and flicked at imaginary lint on his suit. I caught sight of his emerald-tipped blade peeking out from his jacket and resisted the sudden urge to use it on him. He plucked up his drink again and finished it off. "Using someone is rude by any standards."

If that was what he believed, all the better. I stepped into the light, watching as his focus dropped to the pale lavender tattoo on my forearm. He'd been amused by it the first time he saw it. Now I knew why.

"The first night I met you, you knew about my betrothal to Wrath. You mentioned something about tangled webs. Being less cryptic

would have been nice. Especially if you were looking to form an alliance with me."

"In case you haven't already noticed, I'm not *nice*. Nor do I pretend to be. And, even if I were afflicted with a conscience, I would have hated to ruin all the fun." Envy's lips pulled into a cruel slash when he noticed my necklace. "It was much more interesting to sit back and see how it played out. Some of us even wagered on the outcome. I cannot tell you how much I made off of Greed. But he is now in my debt, and I'm sure you can imagine how little he enjoys that."

I moved with purpose across the room. A sideboard with a decanter and glass sat waiting, and, without an invitation, I poured myself two knuckles of amber liquid and sat in the velvet chair beside Envy's. His eyes narrowed, but he didn't call out my rudeness. Or lack of propriety or respect for his elevated rank.

"You wanted me to join your House, even knowing about the betrothal bond I shared with your brother." I took a small sip, anticipating the burn. "It must get lonely. Playing all those games by yourself."

"Whatever you're attempting, I suggest stopping while I'm still feeling hospitable."

His tone was frosty, but he wasn't quick enough to hide the flash of hurt in his eyes. My first shot had struck a bull's-eye. I shoved any feelings of guilt aside. His temporary moment of pain was nothing compared to the finality of my twin's brutal murder.

"Imagine that." I grinned over my drink. "And here I was under the impression I hadn't yet been introduced to your manners. First, threats to me issued by your vampire lapdog, then holding my family hostage. We also can't forget that nasty little incident in the tunnels with your invisible demon army and, of course, gutting Wrath."

"For someone who is *here* instead of with her betrothed, you certainly seem angry about that. I would have thought you'd consider it a favor."

"Turning your blade on yourself would have been the ultimate favor."

Much like when Wrath was displeased, the temperature around us seemed to plummet. I'd felt the frozen horror of Envy's power and influence before, the ice-cold jealousy that eroded all sense of morality. The first licks of his power slid down my spine, but I'd been waiting.

I lifted my hand, as if brushing away a strand of hair, and subtly ran my fingers over Wrath's Mark. It broke this prince's influence before it took hold, just as I'd hoped it would.

Envy jerked back, his attention snapping to mine. A slow smile

spread across his face, dousing the flicker of rage. “Aren’t you full of intrigue tonight. And here I worried dinner would be boring.”

I kept my expression bland, but my heart raced. If he tried to use his power again, I wasn’t sure my little trick would work a second time. He seemed to sense that and was contemplating his next move. His lazy assessment reminded me of a cat that was deciding whether the bird fluttering close by was worth the effort of leaving his sunshine patch for.

Envy’s gaze flicked to his House dagger.

He removed it from its sheath and ran a finger along the blade. There was little doubt in my mind he was dreaming of creative ways to use it on me. My hand inched toward my own weapon, but I did not lift my skirts to reveal it. Whatever happened next, I’d be ready.

We sat there for an uncomfortably long beat, the only sound the ticking of a clock somewhere in the room. Envy stroked the metal, and I swore the blade almost purred. Just when I was certain he was about to pounce, a knock sounded at the door, breaking the murderous tension between us. Envy replaced his dagger. At his command, servants filed in carrying emerald trays and platters of food to the circular table near the far end of the room.

The prince stood in one graceful movement and offered his arm. “Let us break bread tonight, not bones, Shadow Witch.”

I pushed myself to my feet, ignoring his outstretched arm. We were not friends and I did not think he’d like for me to pretend in this instance. Everything about this evening felt like a test. Which suited me fine. I had a test of my own.

I made my way to the table and sat as a chair was pulled out for me. Envy did not appear insulted, only more amused as he took the seat across from me. I doubted many of his subjects ever attempted to irk him. Like Wrath, my refusal to simper before his almighty power might intrigue him enough to entertain me. And my questions. Until he tired of them. I must tread carefully along the line of challenging him without going too far over it.

“In vino veritas.” He waved the servants away and filled our goblets on his own. “In wine there’s truth. Mortals occasionally impress. Though I suppose they’re especially susceptible when it comes to their vices. Give man wine and he’ll wax poetic of its flavors. He’ll probably even liken it to a woman he bedded.” His gaze slid to mine. “Or wishes to.”

I held my tongue. I did not believe he wanted to bed me. And if he did, it wouldn’t be for any other reason than to use it against his brother. “Why do you hate mortals?”

“Assumptions are the death of truth.” He took another sip of his wine. “I do not suggest wandering down this current path.” He

motioned to my goblet. “Have you ever tried using your magic on food or drink?”

“No. Why in the seven hells would I do such a thing?”

“Eight. And I ask because you can spell the wine to give you truth. Just as you would with a truth spell. Whoever drinks it will be under its thrall.”

“I’m supposed to believe you’re telling me this out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Don’t be daft. I can assure you, the closest I get to moral fiber is from ingesting whatever fiber is found in demonberry wine. You want truth and so do I. Why not ensure we both get what we desire? No games.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You must want something terribly bad if you’re willing to sacrifice that information to your enemy.”

“We can be friends tonight.” He grimaced at the word *friend* as if pained by the idea. I arched a brow and he feigned ignorance. “Or lovers.”

I waited to sense it, the magic of this world seducing me with thoughts of beds and bodies and passion. Just as it had done nearly every time the idea of spending the night with Wrath entered my mind. Envy was handsome, his body lithe but hard with muscle. I imagined he’d be attentive to any lover, even one he didn’t particularly find interest in. If only to drive them wild with envy when he moved on to other partners.

There were no romantic feelings aside from the overwhelming desire I felt to kick him.

“If I said yes, you would truly take me to bed.”

“There are always sacrifices in war, love. I would do whatever I must. Though it would hardly be a sacrifice. Pillow talk is quite enjoyable. There are many secrets one reveals after such intimate affairs.” Envy gazed at his wine, his expression far away. “Now be a dear and spell our wine.”

I hesitated. I wanted honest answers to my questions, but I was not sure I was ready to give him the same in return. He could ask anything and I’d be forced to lose *my* mask.

Some risks were worth taking. And others were simply foolish.

Envy’s head tipped to the side as he looked at me. “Is holding on to your truth worth more than learning mine? Perhaps it’s fear that’s holding you back. Maybe I ought to seduce you instead.”

“You can’t goad me into doing your bidding, your highness. It’s prudent to consider all angles before subjecting myself to your interrogation.”

“I could force you to tell me what I want, you know.” His voice was light, casual. Threats rolled off his tongue with the same ease one

remarked on the weather. I ran my fingers across the Mark again, drawing his attention to my neck. “Through violence, my lady. Alexei isn’t the only fanged member of my house. Lose enough blood and I find that the effects are rather similar to truth wine. With less detriment to me, naturally.”

Of course. He’d resort to gifting me to his vampires. I thought again about my twin. Vittoria must have made some difficult bargains, too.

I pushed back from the table and someone rushed over to pull out my chair. It would take some time getting used to being doted on as if I were a pampered royal.

I walked to Envy’s side and took his goblet. I whispered a truth spell over it, then repeated the process with the spare bottles, and my glass.

Envy’s grin was positively disturbing as I retook my seat. He lifted his glass. “Cheers to a night of truth amongst enemies. May our hearts only bleed at the loss of our dignity and not because of a dagger in our backs.”

He downed his entire glass in one go. I raised my brows. “Is that necessary?”

“Not at all.” He refilled his goblet and took another large gulp. “But it doesn’t hurt.”

I took a tentative sip of the wine. It didn’t taste different. If I hadn’t uttered the spell over it myself, I’d never know there was anything suspect about it. I frowned into my drink.

Envy’s sudden bark of laughter broke me from my thoughts. “The witches who raised you kept many secrets, I see. It’s utterly delightful.”

“What is?”

“Watching as your perfect world crumbles.”

“You’re an awful person.”

“My dear, you keep forgetting. I’ve never been afflicted with humanity.” He lifted a shoulder and drank more. “Besides, I meant it in a good way. A phoenix rises from the ashes for a reason. Your world must be destroyed for you to rise anew. And rise you shall. Just as they always feared you would.”

“How long before the truth spell works?”

He finished off his glass and promptly poured another. “It’s already active.”

“Do you like me?”

“I find you tolerable. Should you meet a violent ending, I wouldn’t shed a tear. Nor would I rejoice. I would go on as if you never were.”

I snorted in the most unladylike manner and took another sip of my drink. “The night my nonna attacked you… you seemed to know

her. How?"

"Curses are curious things." He downed another glass and splashed more into his empty cup. "Sometimes they're like trees. They stay rooted to the spot they're planted. Other times they're like wildflowers. Their seeds float along with the bees and fly with the birds. They tangle and grow and thrive outside of that original patch they were sprinkled upon. Kind of like keys. Not all keys fit in locks. Some keys are much more cunning."

I waited for his nonsensical ramblings to revert to a coherent answer. He simply gazed back at me. "That's not even remotely close to what I asked. Are you drunk?"

"Quite." His smile was the first real one he'd given me. A dimple appeared in his right cheek. It softened the harshness he wore like armor. "But what I said is true. There are things I cannot say, no matter the spell used on our wine, because there are greater powers involved still. I know your grandmother. Though I know many other interesting secrets."

I wanted to know how he knew Nonna, but there was little use trying to pry information he clearly either couldn't or wouldn't give. "Tell me about the curse, then."

"It's a tale so old its origins are known only to a few. And even their memories have become copperlike with the age and patina that's formed over them, dulling their shine until the shadow of what was is all that remains."

"What are you talking about?"

"The story of curses and stolen memories. And the unraveling of many lies." He abruptly leaned back, nearly tipping his chair over. "My brother will never force you to marry him. It goes against all that he stands for."

"I didn't ask about your brother."

"No, but I imagine you're curious. Has he indicated he wishes for you to complete the bond?"

I didn't want to answer, but the truth spell enticed the words from my lips. "He's told me about it, but he hasn't indicated which he prefers."

"I won't ask if you've considered it. Especially since we know the manner in which it's accepted. At least in part." I tried to not show relief, but Envy must have seen the slight flash of it in my face. His smile was cruel delight. "He may not force you to wed, but he will not meekly wait in the background. That is not his way, either. He will make his presence and intentions known to each royal House. As he did today."

I took another sip of the truth wine. "Why do you do that?"

"Pardon?"

“You always sow seeds of distrust between your brother and me.” I did not need to drink my wine to ask my next question. “Are you that envious of him? Or do you simply covet anything that isn’t yours?”

“I am not always plagued by envious thoughts.” His green eyes flared with an emotion that wasn’t based in sneering or his namesake. “My brother’s temper caused something important to be taken from me. I hope to one day return the favor. It is not envy I am motivated by. It is retribution. Something I imagine you and I share in common, though I doubt you’ll admit it, even with the truth wine.”

He hadn’t phrased it as a question, so the spell didn’t compel me to answer. “I would do anything to have my sister back. You ought to forgive whatever sins have come between you and Wrath. Happiness should be the only thing that matters.”

“I don’t give a devil’s damn about his happiness.” He glared at his wine, but left it untouched. “It’s obvious you do care, though. More than you’re probably comfortable sharing. Are you in love with him?”

I clamped my teeth together, and gripped my glass. It was no use. The words bubbled up. I clutched on to the phrasing Envy used and allowed the truth to pour from my lips. “No. I am not in love with him. But I do not deny there’s an attraction. He brought me to this realm, sold my soul to his brother, and lied about being my potential husband.”

“The lady doth protest too much.”

“Shakespeare.” I all but rolled my eyes. “How pompous and unsurprising that you’d quote him. Should I be envious over your education now?”

He watched me over the rim of his glass, his gaze sharp. “Odd, isn’t it, that a peasant from Sicily would have such refined taste in books. Or reading anything at all, for that matter.”

I prickled at his insinuation. “We may not have had money and servants, your highness, but we know how to read and write.”

“I assume you’ll tell me your proficiency is because of the spells your grandmother taught you. Or the recipes from your little food shack, or some other such drivel.”

“What are you getting at?”

“It’s simply curious, is all. And you do know how much I enjoy curiosities.”

I grinned. It was the perfect segue into my next line of questioning. “Why are you so interested in collecting objects?”

“I’m mostly interested in divine objects. Well, that’s not entirely true.” He laughed, as if he couldn’t believe the truth was still pouring so freely from him. “I’m only interested in one fully divine object now: the Triple Moon Mirror.”

“What is that?”

He snapped his fingers and a servant appeared. He whispered something too low for me to hear and the attendant dashed away. A moment later, he returned, holding an etched glass case. It was plain, unassuming. I immediately leaned across the table, hoping for a better view.

“It’s a mirror of the gods. *Goddesses*, I should say.” He ran his pointer finger along the glass case, then rubbed it against his thumb as if checking for dust. “It is said it has been embedded with the Maiden, Mother, and Crone’s magic, and can show you the past, present, and future upon request. It used to reside in this case, or so I’ve been told.”

Past, present, future, find. Chills raced along my spine. It was almost exactly what the enchanted skull had said, even down to the Maiden, Mother, Crone aspect.

Envy flipped the lid back, showing a deep lavender crushed velvet bed, indented where a hand mirror once sat. I did my best to not react. But my heart was thrashing wildly in my chest. If there was a divine object that could show me the past, it would solve my sister’s murder.

Excitement coursed through me. This *had* to be what the skull wanted me to find. I was certain of it. If I had the mirror, I no longer needed to worry about marrying Pride or Wrath and choosing my place in their House of Sins.

“It sounds like a children’s legend.”

“All legends contain fragments of truth.” For a second, his gaze was far off again. “Anyway, it is said one needs the Crone’s book of spells, the Temptation Key, and the mirror in order to activate the goddess magic.”

“Let me guess,” I dropped my voice into a conspiratorial whisper, “you’ve collected all but the mirror.”

“My dear, I believe it’s time you viewed my curiosities yourself.” Envy stood. “Shall we?”

SIXTEEN

Envy pushed open the ornate doors with exaggerated showmanship and stepped back, suddenly the gentleman, and allowed me to cross the threshold into his curiosities chamber first.

Dubious about his true intentions, I hesitated for a moment. I doubted he'd led me into a vampire nest, though anything was possible when it came to him.

Remembering the dagger at my thigh, I walked in and halted at the sight.

It wasn't vampires waiting, but tall, shadowy giants, standing in place. The chamber was eerily close to a mental image I'd had when I'd first met Envy in the mortal world. Back then, I'd pictured humans posed and frozen on a macabre checkerboard. The floor we stood on now was not part of a game; it was simply made of black and white marble tiles. And the frozen beings were works of art, not mortals trapped by a sadistic prince of Hell.

Sculptures stood in silent welcome, some cast in bronze, others carved from marble. They were haunting, beautiful, so lifelike I had to reach out to be sure they were not made of flesh. I'd never been to a museum, but I'd seen illustrations in books and could not believe the size of his curiosities collection.

"Are you stunned into silence, or is the wine sloshing around your insides?"

I blinked, realizing I still stood rooted in place. "I had a strange sense of déjà vu."

Envy's attention flicked over my features, but he only lifted a shoulder and dropped it. "Many mortal museums and collections are fashioned after it. It's unsurprising that it's familiar."

"I've never been to a museum."

Which was enough of the truth to satisfy the truth spell. But I couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling of how I'd seen the flash of it all those months ago. I'd never been to this realm, or this royal demon House. Perhaps I had a latent seer talent that was starting to emerge.

According to Nonna, it wasn't uncommon for magic to continue developing throughout a witch's lifetime. It would also make sense that my newfound use of Source unlocked other magic. Latent talent or not, it wasn't important. I shook myself back into the now.

The room was cavernous, enough for our steps to echo as we quietly moved to the foot of the first sculpture. A man wearing a winged helmet, bandolier, and not a stitch of clothing stood with one hand extended, holding the severed head of Medusa. A sword was gripped tightly in his other hand. Something about it made me sad.

Envy strolled over to the scene, his expression softening. "Perseus and Medusa. There are similar pieces in the mortal land, but nothing as exquisite as this. The sculptor captured his downcast eyes, his refusal to be turned to stone and cursed."

"It's stunning craftsmanship, but horrid."

"Not all stories end happily, Emilia."

I knew that. My life had taken unexpected twists, most of which weren't ideal or for the better. We all had bones, if not full skeletons of heartache, in our closets. It hit me suddenly. I subtly looked at the demon prince. Envy was deeply hurt. I wondered who or what had broken his heart so thoroughly. He caught my eye and gave me a hard look. Questions about his heartbreak would not be welcome. For some reason, I allowed the opportunity to interrogate him while he was compelled to answer truthfully slide. Not all secrets were meant to be shared.

We moved in silence to the next statue. This one was magnificent. My favorite by far. An angel—with a powerful body sculpted from war—arched back, his wings extended, arms tossed behind his head, as if he'd been shoved from a great height and was cursing the one who'd taken him down. The feathers were so detailed, I couldn't stop myself from reaching over and stroking one finger along them.

"The Fallen." Envy's tone was quiet, reverent. "Another fine piece."

I studied the great warrior angel. His body was similar to Wrath's. I wouldn't be surprised if the artist had been inspired by him. "Is it meant to symbolize Wrath or Lucifer?"

"It's my interpretation of my cursed brother." Envy's lips twisted

into a grin. “Right before the devil lost his precious wings. And we all followed suit shortly after.”

“Why would you have such a moment memorialized?”

“To always remember.” His voice was suddenly as hard as the marble statue. He shook his head, his expression once again indifferent, as if he’d replaced a mask that had accidentally slipped. “Come. There’s another room filled with objects you might find more interesting.”

We were halfway through the next chamber, decorated with paintings and sketches and mirrors in various ornate frames, when I noticed the bookstands.

I drifted over, drawn to one in particular. A strange, familiar humming started in my center. I knew that feeling. Recognized it. Though it was not quite as I recalled. There were no whispers or fevered voices rising and falling in a cacophony of sounds. Only that subtle hum. I’d experienced it in the monastery the night I’d found my twin. And then again when I’d confronted Antonio. Back then I hadn’t known what it was or what it wanted.

I paused at the open grimoire. A glass case enclosed it, but I knew, without seeing its cover, what it was. It was the first book of spells. La Prima’s personal spell book.

“How did you get this?” My voice was too loud in the smaller room. “It was with me the night I—”

“The night you nearly killed the human sycophant?”

I spun on my heel, glaring. “It disappeared that night. I thought… an Umbra demon.” I inhaled deeply. “You sent one to spy on me, didn’t you?”

“*Spy* is a nasty word. Not to mention, it was watching the monastery. You happened along. Wrong place, wrong time.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and strolled over to the next stand. Another open book. “What you call the first book of spells is not a complete manuscript. It’s one third of a grander, more elaborate text.” He nodded at the book. “The Mother and the Crone are in my possession; the Maiden has gone missing. Goddesses are tricky beings with even trickier magic. And to cross one…” He whistled. “That’s inadvisable.”

“The first book of spells belonged to the First Witch, not the goddesses.”

“My dear, I don’t know what the witches who raised you claimed, or why, but these books were written by the goddesses. Your so-called First Witch stole the book of the dead, the Crone’s book of underworld magic. I can tell you the Crone was not amused.”

He spoke as if he knew the goddesses. “Where is the Crone now? Perhaps I should speak with her myself.”

“By all means, if you find her, please send my regards.”

I blew out a frustrated breath. Something wasn't quite right with this story. Envy not only had a book of spells that could enchant skulls, he'd practically used the phrase one had uttered verbatim. He *had* to be the mysterious sender, but for whatever reason, he wasn't admitting to it.

"Are there spells on necromancy?"

"The Crone is the goddess of the underworld. Her spells reflect the moon, the night, and the dead. Amongst other things, like darker, more violent emotions." He watched me closely. "Bloodwood Forest is a spectacular sight. It lies between my land and Greed's. No demon house may claim it; therefore, you don't need an invitation to travel there. The trick, however, is gaining passage through the territories that border it."

I pulled my attention away from the book of spells. "Why are you telling me about it?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

If we were being friendly, I might as well push that to my advantage. "You mentioned something called the Temptation Key earlier. Is it part of your collection?"

"I'm afraid not. Though not from a lack of trying to acquire it on my part." He started walking away but called over his shoulder, "Before you retire for the evening, you may want to read the plaque of this painting. I find it to be quite informative."

"Where are you going?"

Envy did not answer.

Apparently our time together was over for tonight. I stared in the direction of the demon prince long after he'd left the room, mulling over all I'd learned. Envy was after the Triple Moon Mirror and the Temptation Key. Two objects I was now very interested in obtaining myself.

When I was sure he wasn't returning, I strode over to the painting he'd pointed out. It was an unusual tree. Large with gnarled wood and ebony-and-silver-veined leaves. There was something about the painting that reminded me of the artist who'd captured the seasonal garden in my bedroom suite in House Wrath.

The shadows and care with which the artist had shown each piece of bark or falling leaf was remarkable; it looked as if I could reach into the painting and pull a leaf from the tree.

I ran my fingers over the silver plaque and read the inscription.

CURSE TREE FABLE

Deep in the heart of the Bloodwood Forest lies a tree planted by the Crone herself. It is said, among other favors, the tree

will consider hexing a sworn enemy if the desire to curse them is true. To request the Crone's Curse: Carve their true name in the tree, write your wish on a leaf plucked from its branches, then offer the tree a drop of blood. Take the leaf home and place it beneath your pillow. If it is gone when you arise, the Crone accepted your offer and has granted your wish. She is the mother of the underworld—beware of her blessing.

I reread the fable, unsure why Envy had pointed it out among the fifty or so other paintings lining the walls in this room. Nothing a prince of Hell did was by accident. I had a feeling I'd been unwittingly brought into one of his schemes, but I'd twist his deceit to my favor.

I tucked the knowledge away and slowly made my way through the rest of the gallery, pausing at a map of the Seven Circles. Each demon House sat upon a mountain peak, towering above their territory. I spied the gates of Hell, the Sin Corridor.

A place between House Lust and House Gluttony was marked VIOLENT WINDS. I wondered if that was the howling sound we'd heard in the Sin Corridor.

I continued to study the sketch, committing as much of it as I could to memory. To the southeast, Bloodwood Forest sat between House Greed and House Envy. The Black River carved through the western Houses of Sin, dividing Wrath's castle from both Greed and Pride's territories. It forked off into a smaller tributary that ran behind Greed's castle, winded through the lower portion of House Pride, and up along Envy's northern border. I followed the main portion of the river until it ended in the Lake of Fire. Across from the largest section of the lake was the devil's castle; House Pride sat slightly northwest of House Envy.

Once I felt confident in my ability to recall most landmarks and the general lay of this realm, I left the map and wandered back through the gallery. A liveried member of Envy's staff was waiting for me in the room with the sculptures.

"His highness sends his apologies, but he's left the premises. He said you are welcome to stay as long as you desire, but he will be gone for quite some time." The servant hesitated, cleared his throat, as if uncomfortable with delivering the rest of the message.

"Was there more?"

"His highness also said if you wish to make Prince Wrath jealous, you may sleep in his highness's bed tonight. He suggests doing so in the nude. And… I quote, 'think filthy thoughts regarding the most well-endowed prince in this realm,' while tending to yourself. There is a life-sized painting of Prince Envy on the ceiling, should you require

a stimulating visual."

I mentally counted until the urge to hunt Envy passed. "I'd like to send word to House Wrath. Tell them I'll be home tomorrow at first light."

"Straight away, my lady." He bowed. "Would you like an escort back to your chambers?"

"I believe I can find my way. I'd like to admire the statues once more."

"Very well. I'll send the missive to House Wrath now."

I waited until he left before turning back to the gallery room. Annoyance at Envy quickly gave way to elation. I *knew* I'd have use of the mending kit.

And it had absolutely nothing to do with sewing tears in pretty dresses.

My heart thudded in time with the horses' hoofs as the carriage rolled away from House Envy. Wrath didn't show up to escort me home himself after all; he sent an emissary and *a* royal carriage. The emissary was only too pleased to point out it wasn't the prince's *personal* carriage or steeds. Just whatever he'd had in the stables.

As if that information was of great importance. I wasn't sure how I felt about her sneer or the fact that the prince sent someone in his stead. The emissary sat primly on her side of the coach, pointedly avoiding eye contact and therefore any conversation with me.

I was at a loss regarding her obvious contempt.

I studied the demon from under lowered lashes, feigning sleep. Her deep red hair was coiled into intricate knots around the crown of her head, while the lower portion was a set of long, perfectly styled curls. A muscle in her jaw feathered, as if she was entirely aware of my scrutiny and was biting back a string of admonishments. Maybe her simmering anger was simply a marker of the House of Sin she belonged to and I was reading too much into it.

I shifted my attention to the window. For some reason, she'd pulled the drapery shut before we set off. I moved it back and she glared. "Keep it closed."

I drew in a deep breath through my nose, centering my growing annoyance at her curt attitude. Arguing with her would serve no purpose. And I did not need one more enemy to watch out for. "What's your name?"

"You need only address me by my title."

Though I noticed she refused to call me by the title Wrath had demanded his court use. It didn't bother me one bit. I was no noblewoman. "Very well, Emissary. Where is Wrath?"

Her cool gaze slid to mine. "His highness is occupied."

There was no mistaking the edge in her tone, or the warning that more questions would not be tolerated. I laid my head against the plush carriage wall. We steadily moved down a mountain and I tensed to keep myself pressed against my seat and not slide forward. In what felt like eons, we finally began climbing again before eventually clamoring to a stop. Heedless of her ire, I drew the drapery aside and swallowed a gasp.

I'd never seen the front exterior of House Wrath. When I'd first arrived, it had been delirious in Wrath's arms, and we'd entered through a mountain. His castle was massive, with a gate house, turrets, towers, and an enormous wall that spanned the entire perimeter. Pale stone with black tiled roofing. It was a magnificent study in contrasts.

Vines, frozen solid, clung to the walls.

We passed through the gates and rolled to a stop in a half-circular drive. The emissary waited for a footman to open the coach and then accepted his assistance out. She left without a backward glance, her duty to collect the wayward fiancée done.

I stared after her, wondering why she'd been so cold and if I'd done something to offend her. I knew I hadn't. Aside from my surprise at seeing her instead of Wrath, I'd been friendly.

An uncomfortable suspicion slithered in about her relationship with Wrath, but I shoved it aside. I refused to let it matter.

The footman handed me down and I took my time walking up the stone stairs to the front door. To my right, tucked near the wall, was a garden hidden within a hedge. I made a mental note to visit it once the weather warmed.

If the weather ever warmed. As if on cue, snow began lightly falling, dusting the castle in a fine layer of shimmering flakes.

I hurried inside and brushed off my traveling cloak. Aside from the footman, who was seeing to my trunk, there were no servants waiting to tend to me, for which I was relieved.

I made it back to my bedroom suite without running into anyone. No servants cleaning the castle or its many rooms. No Fauna or Anir or Wrath. I was immensely grateful I didn't see any of the other noble occupants, like the now tongueless Lord Makaden or overly talkative Lady Arcaline.

As the afternoon wore on, I grew restless, though. I was not used to having so much idle time. Back home I was always in the trattoria, or working on my craft in our home kitchen, or reading when I wasn't

falling into bed, bone tired from a hard day's work. I was also rarely alone—my family was always there, laughing and talking and warm. Other nights I'd comb the beach with my sister and Claudia, sharing secrets and our hopes and dreams.

Until my twin was murdered. Then my world irrevocably changed.

Unable to bear the morbid twist of my thoughts, I marched down to Wrath's suite and knocked. No answer. I considered testing to see if the door was locked but refrained. When I'd intruded on him after his violent outburst at dinner I'd had a valid excuse.

I trudged back to my room and decided to work on finding Source again. I closed my eyes, concentrating on the inner well of magic. A few seconds later, I tunneled down into my center, then crashed. It felt as if I'd collided with a brick wall.

I tried to muster up the energy to locate it again, but I was more exhausted than I'd thought. I'd spent the better part of last night awake in bed, fearful of Envy returning in a rage. And the previous night I'd barely slept because of Wrath's confession. I imagined to harness Source I needed to be well rested. And I was anything but.

I pulled out the journal on House Pride I'd *borrowed* from Wrath's library and slowly flipped through each page in hopes of something being written in a language I knew.

My efforts were wasted. There weren't even drawings or illustrations for me to decipher. It was just page after page of small, handwritten notes in what might be demon script. My attention kept straying to my trunk, to the object I'd smuggled from Envy inside it.

I didn't want to remove it from its hiding place just yet. I had a feeling someone might come looking for it soon enough. I couldn't believe it had been so easy to snatch. Too easy, really. Part of me expected alarms to sound and Umbra demons and vampires to swarm in the moment I'd lifted the spell book from its case. Nothing happened. I'd simply walked to my room, sewn it into the inside of my trunk, and waited for a reckoning that never came.

I turned back to the here and now, flipping through the next few pages. I refocused on Pride's House journal, the squiggly lines blurring together.

I woke up several hours later, my face pressed against the open journal.

It was not my kind of book, obviously. A romance novel would have kept me up into the wee hours of the morning, never quite turning the pages fast enough while also trying desperately to savor each tension-filled interaction between the hero and heroine.

I adored how they more often than not despised each other, and how that spark of disdain flamed into something else entirely.

Real life certainly wasn't anything close to a romance novel, but there was still a small part of the old me left that hoped for a happy ending. There was no denying a spark existed between me and Wrath —along with plenty of disdain—but the likelihood of it turning into love was the true fantasy.

I combed my hair and went to check Wrath's rooms again. The demon was still out. Or he wasn't bothering to answer his door. I stood there, hand falling to my side. It was possible he was upset by my dismissal of him at Envy's. But something about that didn't feel right.

He'd been by my side for months in the human world, and then for nearly two weeks here. If he did have a lover, he might have stolen away to visit her. I doubted he would have expected me to return so quickly. I ought to rejoice in the solitude. I had no one looking over my shoulder, no lust-fueled urges toward completing a marriage bond. No distractions. And yet… and yet I didn't want to think about why I was gripped with unease.

I called for dinner and ate in my rooms, thinking about Envy's conversation and all I'd learned. Specifically, the truth spell used on wine and what it might mean for the rest of my mission. The magic worked on a prince of Hell. And while *I* hadn't noticed anything different about our beverage, it didn't mean a prince wouldn't sense the *otherness*. Envy had known what was coming, so I couldn't use him as any means of judging.

What I wanted was to test a theory. And I needed Wrath. If I could spell his wine without him knowing, I might find it to be a useful skill to employ at the Feast of the Wolf. All of the princes would be in attendance. I could whisper the spell over our toast and find out who was responsible for Vittoria's death without anyone being the wiser.

If Wrath couldn't sense the spell. That plan only worked if the test was successful.

I told myself that was the main reason I'd been pacing the corridor outside his rooms the next morning. Listening for any sign of his return. Surely it had nothing to do with missing him. Or growing suspicions of where he'd gone, and who he might be with. Which was nonsense that belonged to House Envy. Maybe those were simply residual jealous emotions left over from my visit to that House of Sin. If such things even occurred.

Two more days passed and still no word from the prince of the House. I had tried a few more times to summon the source of my magic but was met with that same resistance. There was no information on it in the grimoire, so I had to wait it out. Eventually I'd master dipping into that well. I spent my time in the library, searching for new fables. I was interested in learning more about the Curse Tree,

especially the line that claimed it granted *more* than wishes.

I also searched for any books on the Temptation Key or the Triple Moon Mirror. Thus far my efforts were *all* in vain. Finally, when I thought I'd go mad, a knock sounded at my door.

"Hello, Lady Em." Anir grinned. "I'm here to bring you on an adventure."

"Lady Em?" I crinkled my nose. "No one has ever called me Em. I'm not sure I like it."

"That's because you never had a clandestine meeting. Come on. Put on a tunic and trousers, then meet me out here. We're late."

"Where are we going?"

He flashed another smile. This one made my stomach twist up with nerves. "You'll see."

Deciding whatever he'd planned had to be better than sitting alone in my room, or roaming the library and not finding anything useful, I quickly rushed into my bedchamber and changed into the clothes he'd suggested.

Once I tugged on some flat shoes, I followed him into the corridor. We went up one flight of stairs and stopped near the end of a long hallway.

"May I present…" Anir shoved the door open. "The weapons room."

"Goddesses above." I sucked in a sharp breath, though I shouldn't have been surprised at the grandeur, given Wrath's role as general of war. Here was the pearl of House Wrath. "It's impressive."

"I hear that a lot," Anir teased. "Go in."

I stepped over the threshold. My focus darted around the cavernous room that seemed to go on and on. Columns broke the space into smaller, interconnected chambers. If Envy's gallery was the most telling part of his personality, here was Wrath's soul laid bare.

Beautiful. Elegant. Deadly. Honed to brutal perfection and unapologetic about glorying in violence. I stood there, cataloging everything.

The glass ceiling allowed light to filter in and illuminate what would otherwise be a darkened space. The walls and floor were black marble with gold veining. In the main room we'd entered, there was an occult design—featuring the phases of the moon on one side, a smattering of stars on the other, and a serpent swallowing its tail in a circular shape—inlaid in gold on the floor. From what I could see, each corner of that section of the floor featured one of the four elements. Part of the design was covered by a large mat placed directly in the center.

Gold serpents coiled around the ebony marble columns, making them the most fantastical and gorgeous columns I'd ever seen.

Swords, daggers, shields, bows and arrows, and an assortment of knives gleamed in black and gold from their meticulously spaced positions on the walls.

I spun in place, taking in the splendor of it all. In the very back of the room there was a mosaic of a serpent. Unlike the ouroboros inlaid on the floor, this snake's body coiled into an intricate knot. It reminded me of something, but I couldn't place it.

Against the far wall was a bale of hay with a giant target painted on its center. A small table lay to the left with daggers lined up in a perfect row. I stared at them, my fingers itching to grip their hilts and toss them through the air.

"Our first lesson will be on your stance." Anir moved to the center of the weapons room and pointed to the space on the mat in front of him. I stopped gawking and stood where he'd indicated. "Your feet should always be planted firmly on the ground, giving you steady leverage to lunge, strike, or dodge swiftly in any direction without losing balance."

I shifted so I mirrored his position. His feet were slightly wider than his hips, with one a step forward and the other planted back. There was something almost familiar about the pose, but I'd never fought or had reason to have lessons such as this.

"You'll want your weight distributed evenly. Make sure your knees follow the direction your feet are pointed."

I wobbled a little, then adjusted myself. I'd barely glanced up when Anir rushed forward, forearm thrust out like a battering ram, and made contact with my solar plexus, sending me flying backward. My arms windmilled before I landed ungracefully on my rear.

I glared up at my teacher. "You, *signore*, are terrible."

"I am. And you, *signorina*, just learned your first lesson," he lobbed back at me. He held out a hand and helped me to my feet. "Never take your attention off your opponent."

"I thought this lesson was on stance."

"It is." He winked. "Looking down doesn't do you any favors with balance. If you have to glance down, use your eyes, not your entire upper body. Self-awareness is key."

We repeated the routine with varying degrees of my being knocked on my bottom. Even with the padded mat on the floor, I'd be sore in the morning. With each strike, I grew a little more secure in my stance, wobbled less. Sweat beaded my brow as we sparred again and again.

It felt good, working my body, emptying my mind.

Sometime later, Anir called for a break and blotted at the perspiration on his neck and face with a length of linen. I was still ready to go but stepped back, bouncing on the balls of my feet. I felt

alive, my muscles shaking but hungry for more use.

He bent at the waist. “Take five.”

I followed him to a side table set up with a pitcher of water and glasses.

“Where is Wrath?” I don’t know why I blurted it out, but it seemed odd that the demon of war was nowhere to be found while we were in his glorious weapons chamber.

Anir glanced sideways at me as he poured himself a glass and downed it by half. “I didn’t think you’d mind his absence.”

“I don’t. I’m just curious.” When he didn’t respond, I found my ridiculous mouth filling the silence. “He seemed uneasy about my choosing to visit House Envy. I would have thought he’d wish to see me when I returned.”

“Do you ask after me when I’m away?”

“No.”

“Ouch.”

Blood and bones. I immediately kicked myself as Anir’s grin widened. I poured myself some water and took a sip. “I just meant…”

“No offense taken.” His eyes glinted with amusement. “Lie to yourself all you want, but you’ll have to do better around me.”

“Fine. The truth is the emissary got under my skin.”

“Lady Sundra?” Anir snorted. “I imagine so. Her father’s a duke, and she’s never let anyone forget that elevated rank. She always believed she’d make an advantageous marriage match with a prince.”

“Ah. That’s why she became emissary. It put her in close proximity to all of the royals.”

“Look at you, Lady Em. You’re thinking like a cunning noble now. Most of the princes have no designs of being caught in a marriage snare, though. No matter how many schemes noble families like hers attempt, the princes are content as they are. Her natural state runs angry; it’s nothing personal against you.”

“So, the higher the rank, the more the demons exhibit the sin they’ve aligned with.”

“From what I’ve gathered in my time here, yeah. Though no one can ever gain enough power to overthrow a prince. They are something else entirely. It’s like the difference between a lion and tiger. Both are large, predatory cats, but they are not the same.”

“And the lesser demons? They’re different from the nobles.”

“Indeed. And it’s why they often choose to live on the outskirts of their circles.”

“If Lady Sundra is best aligned with House Wrath, how would she marry a prince who represented a different sin?”

“It would be rare, but not unheard of for her to shift sin alignment.”

I propped myself against the table's edge and set my glass down. "You knew Wrath had initiated his acceptance of the marriage bond the night the Viperidae attacked me."

"All hail the queen of changing topics." He offered a dramatic bow. "Is there a question in there, or are you looking for confirmation?"

"I know I'm not his first choice in a wife," I hedged, still thinking of the duke's daughter, "but I'd like to know if there was someone he was interested in before… everything."

The teasing light left Anir's face. "It's not my business or my place to share his story."

"I'm not asking you to. I only want to know if there was someone else."

"Would it change anything if there was?"

I thought about it. My curiosity was at play, for certain, but it *would* change matters. I would refuse the bond and have our fate decided by the council of three Wrath had mentioned.

If he loved someone, well, that would both make me uncomfortable and also clear my way to pursuing Pride. Which was still the surest path to achieving my goal of vengeance.

Unless, of course, I beat Envy to finding the Temptation Key and Triple Moon Mirror. And if a demon prince couldn't sense the spelled wine or food, I might be able to garner truth that way. But I'd need to practice on a prince of Hell, and one was still notably absent, curse him.

I returned to the matter at hand. I would not want to be tied together in a loveless marriage with Wrath if he would always be pining for someone else.

"Yes. It would. It would change a lot."

"Careful." A low voice drawled from behind me. "Or I might think you'd actually *like* to marry me."

SEVENTEEN

I closed my eyes and silently swore before glowering at Anir. “You are truly the worst.”

“I bet seven devil coins you feel different after your next lesson.” The traitor shot me a devious grin. “Don’t forget your purse tomorrow, Lady Em.”

“Lock the door on your way out.”

Wrath’s voice was much too close. I felt his breath near the base of my neck, and I briefly considered rushing to the door or inventing a spell to have the floor swallow me whole. Instead, I squared my shoulders and slowly turned around. His focus was entirely on the human. Anir lost a bit of his playful swagger, replacing it with a seriousness I hadn’t seen in him since the night Lord Makaden lost his tongue.

“No one is to enter this room until I give the signal that our training is over. Is that understood?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

Anir offered me a polite bow and quickly made for the exit. Coward. I smiled to myself. Speaking of cowards, pretending the demon prince wasn’t there, and hadn’t overheard something I never meant him to hear, would not serve *my* bid for being fearless, either.

I forced myself to meet Wrath’s imposing stare and hid my surprise as I assessed my newest opponent. He wasn’t dressed entirely in black today; he wore a brilliant white shirt and tailcoat. I took in his huge frame, the cold set to his features, and swallowed hard. He

was not in a pleasant mood. I decided now was not the time for bravery. A clever schemer understood the art of retreat. Wrath was up to no good and I wanted no part in discovering how bad he could be.

"I don't think your training is necessary. Anir was doing an exceptional job."

A smile spread across the prince's face, though there was no hint of mirth to be found in it. The look confirmed that remaining around for this training was a terrible idea. I took a step back and something dangerous sparked in Wrath's eyes.

"He doesn't possess the skills needed for this lesson."

"Oh, well, I have a prior engagement. We'll have to reschedule."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, it is."

"Do you recall the bargain we struck in my bedchamber?"

I went to nod when an immense wave of lethargy washed over me, and I suddenly found my head too heavy to move. Wrath's intense focus homed in on my emotional and physical shift. There was no concern present in his expression, only a hard edge that should have worried me.

And it would have, if I wasn't in such a horrid state of lassitude.

I couldn't bring myself to care, or stand, apparently. My legs folded of their own volition and I sank to the ground, crashing in a heap of tangled limbs. My cheek pressed into the thick mat, the fibers scratching and uncomfortable. Still, I didn't so much as roll over to get comfortable. I didn't even blink. To my horror, a dribble of saliva worked its way out of the corner of my mouth. I couldn't care less.

In fact, I found I *really* didn't much care for anything. Not even the gleam of victory flashing in Wrath's eyes as he towered over me.

He strolled around my prone form. "Look at me, Emilia."

I wanted to, almost more than anything, but energy was too hard to come by. I had nothing left in my reserves to spare. My eyelids drifted shut instead. Despite my undignified position, lying sprawled on the floor, drooling, I couldn't muster the resolve to—

The slothful feeling snapped, as if it had never been. Anger, all-consuming and red-hot, brought me to my feet a breath later. Rage had my body trembling. Or perhaps it was wrath.

I flung myself at the demon. "I'm going to kill you!"

"Kill? I'm sure you mean kiss."

Wrath chuckled at my sudden change in temper, then, before I could touch him, the atmosphere once again abruptly shifted. Suddenly, I was no longer trying to get my hands around his throat; I was clawing him closer, wrapping my legs and arms around his body. I wanted him.

Goddess curse me. The need to bed him was overwhelming, the

ache unbearable.

I thought I knew desire before in the Crescent Shallows. Nothing came close to this. I could think of nothing else except his hands on me. My hands on him.

In the back of my mind I knew something was terribly wrong. This was exactly what Lust had done to me that night on the beach, but I was unable to focus on anything but my desire.

Our mutual fury would have a perfect outlet in passion, granting us both release as we fought to undress, to out-caress, to make the other come undone. I dragged Wrath's face close to mine, his eyes flaring with that same desire as I slowly took his bottom lip between my teeth.

"Kiss me." I left his mouth only to run my tongue and teeth over the side of his neck, tasting and suckling his skin as I brought my lips close to his ear. "I need you."

"Want, but never need, my lady." He did not return my pursuit, but his grin was positively sinful as he stepped away from my touch. "In the Sin Corridor, you were tested for envy. I'm curious what got you so incensed. Do you recall what illusion spurred that on?"

My desire evaporated. An image of Wrath engaged in bedding a woman who wasn't me resurfaced. Once again I saw her legs wrapped around his body, his hips rolling forward with each deep thrust inside her. Instead of her moans, I could now hear his.

A possessive, dark emotion bubbled inside me. I was so jealous of them, I wanted to kill. My blood turned as cold as my tone. "Yes."

"Tell me what you saw."

"You and another woman. In bed."

There was a moment of silence. As if he hadn't expected that to be the reason. "And how did that make you feel?"

I exhaled, the sound more akin to a growl. "Murderous."

Wrath slowly began circling me again, his voice quiet, but taunting. "Was that before or after you saw the pleasure she'd given me? The pure ecstasy I felt buried inside her warmth."

A tear slid down my cheek. I was not sad or even furious. I was now fully consumed by jealousy. Not of the other woman, but of the night of intimacy they'd shared. I wanted that. Wanted Wrath with an intensity that razed all reason from my mind. And that level of envy was almost as overwhelming as the night I first met the prince who ruled over that sin.

Envy had used his influence on me and I'd never forget the iciness of—

Understanding descended in a burst of anger, breaking the spell. "You monstrous beast. You're using your powers on me!"

"And how easily you succumbed to them." Wrath's fury rose to

meet mine. “Do you want my brothers to manipulate you? Maybe you wish to become an object for their amusement. Perhaps you will start by being *mine*. Remove your clothing and dance for my pleasure.”

“You’re a pig.”

“I am much worse than that. But a bargain is a bargain.”

“I did not consent to this bullshit.”

“Lie. *You* asked *me* to arm you. Demanded, if I recall correctly. I countered with training you against physical and magical threats. Did you not agree to that?”

“Yes, but—”

“Remove your clothing.”

There was a strange echo of power in his voice. I tried to shove it away, tried fighting it, but felt the pressure building and caving in. I desperately tried to erect an emotional barrier between us, but Wrath would have none of it. Before I could touch the summoning Mark on my neck, his voice rang out clear and strong and filled with dominating power.

“Now.”

The dam broke, and so did my will. My fingers swiftly loosened the buttons and stays of my trousers. I shimmied out of them, allowing the material to pool at my feet. My tunic was gone next. Wrath slid his attention from the top of my head to my toes, and pulled it up as slowly. There was no lust or warmth or appreciation in his gaze. Only anger.

And he wasn’t alone in that feeling. I hated that he’d compelled me to disrobe. Choosing to do so in the Crescent Shallows was powerful, freeing. This was neither of those things. I would make him pay for this. As quickly as my need for revenge flared, it vanished with the next wave of his will.

I went to remove my undergarments, but his voice cut through my haze. “Leave those on. Sway your hips.”

I focused on the single ember of fury that hadn’t been tamped down by Wrath’s magical command. Trying with all of my might to ignite that kernel of emotion that still belonged to me, and use it to swat his magic away. *I* would be the one to decide when to undress before him or anyone else. *I* would be the master of my own will. And I would keep fighting for myself, no matter how dire or desperate or futile the situation became.

Sensing my resolve, Wrath unleashed more of his power.

“I said, *sway your hips*.”

Sentient thought, emotion, and free will were locked deep inside me. All I knew was the sound of his voice, his desire. His will pumped through my veins, dominated me in every sense of the word. Became one with my heart.

I did as he commanded. I became sin and vice. I was lustful. And I adored it.

Swaying suggestively, I kept my attention on him. I wished he'd ask me to remove my undergarments. Then I wished he'd remove his.

Wrath moved closer, his expression a study of cold fury. I could not understand why he was displeased. I erased the remaining distance between us and danced against him, pressing up against his tense body. Something about our position reminded me of another time, another dance. And the same anger that coursed through him at that bonfire.

He was a difficult creature then, and doubly so now.

"Is this not what you desire?"

"Not at all." He took a large step away, placing a hateful distance between us. "You will address me as master from now on. Drop to your knees."

"I will *never*—" Anger flared, then extinguished as quickly. I went to the ground, head bowed. "Does this please you, master?"

"Remove my right boot."

I undid the laces of his boot, then pulled it off, waiting for his next direction.

"Slide your hands up my to calf." I reached for his leg and he yanked it back. "Start from the ankle."

Without hesitation, I dragged my hands up his body, and over the muscle of his calf. My fingers brushed against something hard. I glanced up. "Have I pleased you now, master?"

Wrath reached down to lift my chin, his focus roaming across my face. He was searching for something, but the deep frown indicated he hadn't found it.

"Learn to protect yourself. *That* will give me ultimate pleasure."

With him, I somehow understood the very essence of pleasure. That I could do. I let go of his calf and reached for the band of his trousers. "Let me please you now, master."

The temperature around us plummeted several degrees.

"If I wanted you on your knees, bare before me, without a thought of your own in your head, I would will it. If I desired to fuck you into our marriage, you'd do exactly as I said. And you'd beg for more. Neither attracts, nor pleases me. I long for an *equal*. Grab the dagger hidden on my leg. Get up."

I slid the blade from the leather sheath and pushed myself to my feet, heart sinking at his harsh tone and dismissal of my advances. I reached for his hand, hoping to entice him to take what I was offering. "I—"

Fury, untamed, overwhelming, and all-consuming burned away the lust I'd felt. I gripped the dagger so hard my hand ached. Wrath

did not take his attention from mine as he slowly undid the first few buttons of his pristine shirt. “Press the blade to my heart.”

I closed the distance between us, the tip of the dagger pricking his skin. I was now wrathful. I was fury in the flesh. And I would take what was owed to me and mine.

Beginning now. With this hateful prince.

Wrath leaned in, his voice low and seductive. “This is what you dream of. Blood and revenge. Take your vengeance, *witch*. Recall what I just made you do. How you fell to your knees, begging to please me. Let hatred and your favorite sin consume you.”

“Shut up.”

“Perhaps you liked it when I made you strip. When I bent you to my will.”

“I said *shut up*!”

“Maybe I should show you how very wicked I can be.”

I stared at his chest, at the blade piercing his skin. A slight trickle of blood rolled down his body. Through the wrath and fury overwhelming my senses, I remembered. I’d taken a blade to his heart before. In the monastery. He’d sworn it would take much more than a dagger to his chest to end him. I’d wanted to test the truth in those words then. He was offering me the chance to do so now. I swallowed hard, my throat bobbing. Unshed tears burned my eyes.

My hand shook, the blade digging in harder as I strained against it.

“Take. Your. Vengeance.”

His demonic influence battled my will. And won.

A tear slipped free as I leaned into the blade, using my upper body weight to shove through muscle and bone. I watched with blazing fury as it slid into his chest. Blood poured from the wound, stained his shirt, made my fingers slick. I didn’t pull it out. I twisted the dagger, gritting my teeth before I screamed loud enough to summon Satan himself.

The demon prince watched impassively as I yanked the blade free and stabbed him again.

And again.

And again.

EIGHTEEN

Wrath removed all influence over me at once.

I stared at the blade sticking out of the demon's chest, my whole body violently trembling in the aftermath. Nausea coursed through me in place of the rage I'd just felt. I let go of the weapon and jerked back, unable to look away. There was so much blood. Wrath's blood.

It bloomed obscenely across his white shirt like a flower of death. And if it had been anyone else, they would be dead. I would have killed them. I dragged in breath after breath, the weight of what could have been, of what I did, nearly crushing me.

Wrath wrenched the dagger from his chest and tossed it away. I flinched as it clattered against the far wall, the only sound in the chamber now aside from my ragged breaths. He'd made me stab him. In the heart. I… I couldn't stop looking at the place I'd shoved the dagger in. Couldn't stop hearing the sickening crunch of bone as I pierced his chest. I fought to keep my hands at my sides, to not cover my ears and scream until that wretched sound ceased in my head.

The wound was already healed, but his shirt was damp with blood. Memories of another chest, another heart, flooded my senses. My twin. All I could envision was her brutalized body. How easily it could have been her under my blade. Fighting back had been useless.

I turned my hands over, sticky, bloodstained palms up, and cried, "How dare you? How dare you subject me to that depravity?"

"Yes, how dare I teach my wife to protect herself against her enemies."

“I am not your wife yet. And if this is your idea of proving why we ought to marry, you’re mad. You are the most despicable creature I’ve ever had the misfortune to know.”

“If that were true, I would have left you as Lust had when I released you from my thrall.”

The demon thrust a dressing gown at me. I hadn’t seen him holding it before, but I hadn’t noticed much of anything aside from the sins he’d wanted me to experience.

I was seeing plenty now.

His expression was the closest thing to murder I’d ever witnessed. As if his little power display infuriated him more than it had me. As if that were even possible.

I’d pierced his heart with a dagger. I’d never been so upset in my life. And I’d felt *a lot* of angry emotions since my twin’s murder.

I snatched the dressing robe and shoved my arms through it, hating him for knowing I would need it. I also understood with vivid clarity why he wore white. His preparation for the training made me seethe all the more. It indicated he knew exactly what sins he’d use, what he’d influence me to do, and he’d thought ahead to what I’d need after his little power display.

I was tempted to stride back to my bedroom suite in my underwear, or strip down to nothing. Let his court see me in all my glory.

“Be my guest.” He no doubt discerned my thoughts from my body language. He swung an arm out. “If you’d prefer to walk around without the robe, I certainly won’t object.”

“You really should quit speaking now.”

“Make me.”

“Don’t tempt me, demon.”

“Do it.” He moved until he towered over me. “Use your power. Fight back.”

Childish taunt. I dipped into my source of magic, trying to wrench a bit of power up to knock him on his smart ass. A wall of nothing greeted me again. I was so frustrated, I wanted to scream. Wrath’s eyes narrowed, missing nothing.

“We will train every day until the Feast of the Wolf. You will learn to protect yourself from my brothers. Or you will suffer greater indignities than the ones I have demonstrated today. Be thankful, *fiancée*, that I do not wish to harm your person. Only your ego and pride. Both, if I am not mistaken, can be repaired.”

“You made me stab you.”

“I heal fast.”

Too bad the emotional impact of today’s little lesson wouldn’t heal as quickly. I cinched the belt at my waist. “I despise you.”

“I can live with your hate.” A muscle in his jaw flickered. “Far better to use it to your advantage, rather than adore me and succumb to the depravity of this world.”

“Why violence?” My voice was quiet. “You did not need to unleash my wrath that way.”

“I offered you an outlet. Vengeance is poison, a slow death of self. Seek justice. Seek truth. But if you choose revenge over all else, you will lose more than your soul.”

“You cannot seriously be claiming to care about my soul.”

“Your grief cannot be extinguished through hatred. Tell me, do you feel as you imagined? Did spilling my blood heal your wounds? Have those scales of justice finally tipped into balance, or did you slip a little further into something you don’t recognize?”

I set my jaw and glared. We both knew I did not feel better. If anything, I felt worse.

“I didn’t think so.” He turned on his heel and strode toward the door. “I will meet you here tomorrow evening.”

“I never agreed to multiple training sessions.”

“Nor did you set parameters during our bargain. I suggest you come prepared to do battle, or you will find yourself once again in your underthings, on your hands and knees before me, begging. Or stabbing. Or both.”

I reined in my emotions. Wrath was currently a giant ass, but he was never impulsive. “Does the timing of this first lesson have to do with my visiting House Envy?”

“No.” Wrath did not turn back, but he paused before opening the door. “Votes to choose the guest of honor for the Feast of the Wolf were cast yesterday.”

And there it was. He must have hoped someone more interesting would have emerged to take my place. “You still believe I’ll be chosen.”

“Of that I have little doubt.”

“Your plan tonight was to what? Show me how heartless you truly are, how powerful?”

“My brothers will be more than happy to show you how sinful they can be in front of a large, eager audience.” He took a deep breath. “If you thought Makaden was bad, his behavior is nothing compared to a gathering hosted by my family. They will take until they’re bored. Then they’ll discard the broken pieces. And,” he added quietly, “if you are so appalled by what just happened here, in front of only me, you truly have no idea what you’re in for.”

“You should have warned me we’d begin training tonight.”

“My brothers will not ask. Nor will they give any warning.”

“I am not betrothed to your brothers. If you want an equal, I

suggest treating me like one. We may have made a bargain, but that does not mean I couldn't be forewarned."

"The point of this lesson was to show how vulnerable you are, not shame you."

I stared at the tense lines of his back. The white-knuckled grip he had on the door handle.

"I am not a hero, Emilia. Nor am I a villain. You ought to know that by now."

"Leave me. I've heard enough excuses tonight."

He didn't move for a beat, and I braced myself for whatever he seemed to be struggling with saying. Without another word, he slipped from the room, the door quietly shutting behind him. I stared at the door for a few moments, gathering myself.

I imagined this training was as much for his benefit as it was for mine. If anyone succeeded in having me half-naked and writhing during the feast—or worse—the general of war might remind his family how he'd come by that military honor. And I didn't think the path to that particular title had been cleared without a good deal of bloodshed on Wrath's part.

I glanced at the dagger I'd used to stab him, the blade coated in his drying blood. I couldn't quite identify the exact emotion raging through me in place of the fear, but I no longer felt nauseated. I felt like I could breathe fire. And with my ability to summon it, I might be able to do just that with a bit of practice. Goddess help the demon princes now.

I stormed into my bedroom suite and slammed the door with enough force to shake the large painting hanging near the bathing chamber. Of all the arrogant, spiteful, nasty tricks to pull. Yes, I'd agreed to the cursed bargain, but I hadn't known it was a binding contract.

My cheeks flared with fury. Losing my sense of control rattled me more than any of his demonic tricks. When he walked into that training room, he had a plan and executed it flawlessly. And I'd been at his mercy. *That.* That was the core of my anger.

"'You will address me as master from now on.'" I mocked, using my best impression of his voice. "Hateful monster."

I charged into my bathing chamber and began scrubbing the blood from my hands, all the while seething at Wrath. Even though he didn't appear particularly pleased or smug by his efforts, it did not change the fact he'd unleashed himself on me.

I dried myself off and marched in an angry circle around my room. I was mad with him for proving his point, but even more upset that I'd been rendered nearly helpless.

Taking all that aside, I had to admit it was far better to be subjected to Wrath's influence, wretched though it may be, because at least I knew he wouldn't carry things too far. He might make me strip and beg, or take a blade to *his* heart, but he'd never take true advantage or cause me to hurt anyone else.

I stared down at my now-clean hands. A troubling thought entered my mind. If a demon prince willed it, I would murder someone at their command. Wrath proved that tonight. Part of me wanted to stab him, but I never would've crossed that line on my own.

I thought of Antonio, how he'd been clearly under *some* influence. If Wrath could wield other sins with ease and strength, it stood to reason that his brothers also possessed the talent.

Which meant any one of them could have been manipulating Antonio into killing the witches. His hatred was already there because of how his beloved mother died. It would not have taken much for that emotion to be drawn out, used against him.

Shoving thoughts and worries from my mind about my sister's murderer and the Feast of the Wolf vote, I went to my wardrobe and donned a simple black dress.

I glanced down as a flash of off-white peeked out from the darkness. One of the enchanted skulls had slipped from its covering when I'd removed my dress.

I expelled a breath. I still needed to sort through the skull puzzle and figure out if Envy had been the one who'd sent them. Doubt crept in regarding his involvement. It made little sense for him to secretly send the skulls only to openly share information with me.

I bent to replace the scarf when the outer door creaked open.

"Emilia, I wanted to—" Wrath's attention fell on the enchanted skull. Whatever he'd been about to say was immediately forgotten as he crossed the room in a whirl of black, gold, and fury. He wrenched the skull from my wardrobe and spun around, staring as if he hardly knew me. "What the—"

"Unless you wish to be slapped with an unpleasant spell, I suggest you rethink your tone. We are no longer in your training ring. I won't tolerate rudeness outside of our lessons."

He inhaled deeply. Then exhaled. He repeated both actions. Twice. With each inhalation and exhalation, I swore the atmosphere grew charged. Storm clouds were gathering.

"If you would be so kind, my lady, to please explain *how* this came to be in your possession, I'd very much like to know."

I noticed a vein in his throat throbbing. After what he made me

do to him, it gave me a perverse sense of glee to see him so mad. “Why are you here?”

“To apologize. Answer me. Please.”

“Someone left it. Along with a second skull.”

“Second skull?” He spoke through his teeth, as if forcing polite manners against the incredulity playing out across his features. “Where, pray tell, is it now?”

“My wardrobe. Behind that ridiculous gown with the big skirts.”

Without uttering another word, Wrath calmly ducked inside my wardrobe and retrieved the object in question. It appeared to take Herculean effort on his part to remain calm. “Might I ask when the first skull arrived?”

“The night Anir brought food and wine.”

“The first night you were here?” His volume went up a notch. I nodded, which seemed to set his teeth on edge. “You didn’t think this information was worth sharing because…”

My smile was anything but sweet. “I was unaware that I needed to report to you, *master*. Would you have answered any of my questions?”

“Emilia—”

“Which brother possesses this sort of magic? Who would want to taunt me? Someone must hate me an awful lot. They enchanted the skulls with my sister’s voice. Another lovely dagger to my heart. Do you have any ideas to offer?”

I raised my brows, knowing he wouldn’t say a word. His lips pressed into a firm line and I couldn’t help the dark laughter that bubbled up from deep within.

“I suspected as much. Though I can promise you this, it will not be the last time I decide to keep my own counsel until I’ve thoroughly investigated on my own.” I pointed to the door. “Please leave. I’ve had quite enough of you tonight.”

His eyes narrowed at the dismissal. I doubted anyone ever spoke to him in such a way. It was high time he got used to it. “Regarding the training earlier—”

“I am fully capable of understanding the value in the lesson, no matter how appalling your methods. Regardless of our bargain, in the future, you will ask if I want to train.” I schooled my face into indifference. “If you’re not planning on sharing information with me, this interrogation ends now. Put the skulls back and get out.”

“The skulls will be locked somewhere safe.”

“Vagueness will not work for me. Be specific. If I permit you to take the skulls, where will they be?”

“My private suite.”

“I will see them when I wish. And you will share any information

you learn."

He glowered at me. "If we're making demands, then, so long as you agree to dine with me tomorrow, I will grant your request."

"I cannot give you an answer tonight."

"And if I insist?"

"Then my answer is no, your highness."

"You may beg off conversation tonight. Refuse to dine with me. But we *will* speak about everything. Soon."

"No, Wrath. We will speak about this when we're *both* ready to." I watched him absorb the statement. "I will consent to the training, and your influence, *only* in that room. Everywhere else, you will respect my wishes."

"Or else?"

I shook my head sadly. "I understand your realm is different, and your brothers are diabolical and conniving, but not every statement is a threat. At least not between us. Know this: from here on out, if you do not respect my wishes, I will not stay here. It's not to punish you, but to protect myself. I will forgive your lapse in decorum, judgment, and basic decency if you vow to learn from this mistake. You will, however, share all information you glean about the skulls, whether or not I decide to dine with you. Do we have a bargain?"

He looked me over, *really* looked, and finally nodded. "I accept your terms."

Wrath collected both skulls and paused, his attention landing on my nightstand. And the journal on House Pride. "How were you planning on reading it? Let me guess." His voice turned suspiciously low. "You were going to strike a bargain with a demon? Offer a piece of your soul."

"I considered it."

"Allow me to save you the trouble. It's not written in a demonic language. And no bargain you strike with anyone—save me—will give you the answers you seek with *any* of those journals. All you had to do was ask and I would have given it to you."

"Perhaps. But would you have given me a way to read it?"

"I don't know."

He strode from the room, and I didn't move until I heard the click of the outer door closing. Then I slumped against the wall.

I counted off my breaths, waiting until I was sure he would not return, and then I allowed the tears to come hard and fast. I doubled over, sobs wracking my body, consuming me. In the matter of an hour I'd been subjected to multiple sins and had stabbed my potential future husband. Tonight could certainly be classified as an evening from Hell.

I abruptly stood, chest heaving with the effort to rein in my

emotions.

I brushed the wetness from my cheeks and vowed once again to best my enemies. Even the ones who no longer felt like adversaries.

NINETEEN

Ice-coated flowers sparkled like crystal and branches tinkled like winter chimes above my head as I strolled through the garden.

It was cold enough that I needed fur-lined gloves and a heavy velvet cloak, but the morning itself was lovely. Peaceful. I hadn't had many of those days over the last few months, and this felt decadent. I squinted up through the latticework of boughs. On a good number of trees leaves stubbornly clung to life, frozen until either warmth or sunshine set them free.

I still hadn't seen the sun through all the snow and overcast skies, so it would probably be a good long while before a thaw happened. If ever. I recalled the way Wrath had soaked up the sun one lazy afternoon on the roof of his commandeered castle in my city. Back then I'd assumed he'd missed the fiery pits of his hellish home. Now I knew better.

Clusters of flowers—pinkish purple roses and peonies and something with petals that looked like tiny silver crescent moons—sprung up in wider sections of the maze. I slowly walked along the inner pathway, the hedges towering on either side, beautiful living walls dusted with snow. The gardens of House Wrath were another stunning example of his refined tastes.

I followed the meandering trail until I came upon a reflecting pool near the center.

A marble statue of a naked woman stood in the water, a crown of stars on her head, two curved daggers in hand, her expression one of

icy fury. She looked as if she'd tear through the fabric of the universe with those nasty blades, and regret nothing of her actions.

An oversized serpent—twice the circumference of my upper arms—wound up her left ankle, slithered between her legs as it clung to the left calf and thigh, then coiled around her hips and rib cage. Its large head covered one breast while its tongue flicked out toward the other, not as if it were about to lick, but as if it were blocking it from the view of curious passersby.

I moved closer, entranced and a little horrified by it. The serpent's body actually hid most of her private anatomy. A wicked protector of sorts. Its scales were carved with expert care, almost fooling one into thinking it had been real and turned to stone.

I circled the giant statue. Her hair, long and flowing, had little crescent moon–shaped flowers carved into the unbound locks. Near the bottom of her spine, a goddess symbol had been etched horizontally. I reached over to pet the serpent when a low, keening howl grumbled up from deep below the earth. I jerked back and connected with a wall of warm flesh.

Before fear registered or I had time to react, an arm with steel-like muscle snaked around my waist, tugging me close. A sharp dagger pressed into my side. I stilled, breathing as shallowly as possible. My assailant leaned in, their breath warm against my icy skin. Hair on the back of my neck rose.

"Hello, little thief."

Envy.

I shoved my fear into the deepest part of my mind, far from where he could detect just how much he'd rattled me. "Attacking a member of House Wrath is foolish. And coming here without an invitation is doubly unwise. Even for you, your highness."

"Stealing from a prince is punishable by death." His low chuckle lacked any trace of humor. "But that's not why I'm here, Shadow Witch."

He dropped the dagger and released me so quickly I stumbled forward. I squared my shoulders and faced him, my expression cold and hard. "If you've come for the book of spells, your trip was wasted. It belongs to me."

I'd meant to say it belonged to witches, but it felt like the truth when the words escaped my lips. Envy blinked slowly.

"Bold and brazen. Perhaps you've found those claws after all." His attention slid over me and then to the statue. "Have you noticed anything odd lately? Perhaps something strange about your magic?"

"No."

He flashed a quick grin. "We all sense lies, Emilia. Allow me to be blunt. You stole from me, but I stole right back from you. Tit for tat."

“Nothing has been stolen from me.”

“There was a curse on the spell book. Anyone who removed it from my collection would lose something vital to them in return.”

Cold dread sluiced through my veins. I had not been able to dip into my source of magic since I’d come back from his royal house. “You’re lying.”

“Am I? Perhaps you ought to cast a truth spell on me.”

He sheathed his dagger and gave me another slow once-over as he waited. Even though I suspected it would be futile, I concentrated on that well of Source, trying to dip into it and draw enough magic to wipe him—and his smug expression—from this circle.

There was nothing but an impossibly thick wall where I’d once felt that slumbering beast. He sneered, as if the sight of me disgusted him.

“I didn’t think so. You, my dear, are no more than a mortal now.”

He turned and started walking away.

I marched after him, fuming. “You had no right to curse me.”

“And you had even less right to steal. I’d say we’re even.”

I thought of my plans to spell the wine at the Feast of the Wolf. I needed my powers back. That was nonnegotiable. “Fine. I’ll return the book. Wait here while I go get it.”

Envy stuck his hands in his pockets, considering the offer. “I find this is a much more interesting turn of events. Keep the book. I’d much rather watch your plans crumble.”

“I’m willing to strike a bargain.”

“Too bad you didn’t think of that before. I might have been open to an agreement that would benefit us both. Now? Now I’ll enjoy watching fate run its course.”

I clamped my teeth together to keep from either cursing him, or begging him to reconsider. A faint wail drifted up from the bowels of the earth again. Goose bumps swiftly rose along my body. I turned to stare at the statue.

“I’d not become too curious about that, pet.”

“I told you not to call me—”

I faced Envy again, only to discover he was already gone. A wisp of glittering green and black smoke wafting around was the only indication he’d been there at all. I glanced back at the statue and listened to the cries of whatever was being tortured deep beneath it. It was mournful, hopeless. Brokenhearted. A sound that pierced through my emotional armor.

I wondered what was damned enough for Wrath to bury below his wicked House in the underworld, alone and miserable. Then I realized it must be more horrid than I could even fathom to receive that punishment. Wrath was a blade of justice, swift, unemotional, and

brutal.

But he wasn't cruel. Whatever was making that terrible cry…

I did not want to encounter it alone without magic. I hurried from the garden, the sounds of suffering still ringing in my ears long after I'd slipped between my sheets that night.

The next day, Fauna excitedly danced in place outside my door. Her knocks were as fast and light as a hummingbird's wings. I opened the door and grinned. Her slippered feet moved as swiftly as she spun us around. "Invitations for the feast are arriving this week!"

My smile vanished. After Wrath's devilish training session, I did not share her excitement. Honestly, I hadn't been thrilled by the feast the first time he had told me about it, either. But now… now I found my gaze straying to the clock, jumping at every sound in the corridor. I was nowhere near being ready to withstand a demon prince's influence. Not to mention, being without my magic was another obstacle I hadn't anticipated.

Fauna seemed to think we wouldn't hear about who was hosting for a few more days, but I had other suspicions. I had no base for the fears that kept growing, so I did my best to ignore the air of foreboding that settled over me like a storm cloud.

My friend called for tea and sweets and lounged in my receiving room with a book. I tried to relax the same way but was wound too tightly. After my encounter with Envy in the garden, I'd combed through books on magic, searching for a way to break a curse or hex.

It was complex—I'd either need the one who'd cast it to release me, or figure out the intricate structure of the curse; it was described in one grimoire as being similar to a series of magical threads woven together. I'd have to locate the source knot, then snip it. If I guessed wrong or undid the wrong knot, I could end up magically snipping the thread of life. And die.

The author of the book on hexes made sure to point that out several times, as if anyone could mistake the meaning of "snipping the thread of life."

I'd briefly contemplated visiting the Matron of Curses and Poisons, but I'd still face the very real possibility of death if she didn't locate the correct thread.

It was a gamble I was unwilling to try. At least not yet.

I wished Anir would show up and start our lesson early. The physical training would help burn off the excess nerves. And I

desperately needed to rid myself of jitters.

Finally, late into the evening, a servant delivered the envelope I'd been dreading. There was no royal crest, no indication of what it contained, but I *knew*. My name and title were the only bit of writing on it. Indicating it was not just a note from the prince of this royal House.

I took the envelope from the servant with the same level of enthusiasm as if it were news of my execution. I used the slim dagger Wrath had gifted me and ran it along the upper edge, neatly cutting it open at the seam.

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO

House Gluttony

FOR THIS BLOOD SEASON'S

Feast of the Wolf.

GUEST OF HONOR:

LADY EMILIA DI CARLO, CURRENTLY OF HOUSE WRATH

If my heart pounded any harder, it might crack a rib. I'd been told I'd have a choice, even if ultimately I'd be *encouraged* to choose the hosting House. I couldn't help but fear other rules would be tossed aside at the last minute, too.

I stared at the invitation, its elegance a severe contrast to the panic it induced. My being chosen as the guest of honor wasn't a surprise; Wrath had already made it clear I'd likely be the unlucky one, but seeing it in black and white made the whole thing terribly real.

Especially the part about my greatest fear or a secret of my heart being forcibly wrenched from me in front of the entire assembly. With Wrath's "lessons" and the mortification and horror they brought fresh in my mind, I felt as if I was going to be sick.

"What is it?" Fauna set her book aside. "Has his highness sent for you?"

"No." I blew out a breath. "It's the invitation to the Feast of the Wolf."

“So soon?” She shot up from the divan, thrusting her hand out with excitement she couldn’t contain. “Who’s hosting this season?” I gave her the card and her mouth formed a perfect *O* of surprise as she scanned it. “House Gluttony. Interesting. His parties are legendary for their debauchery. Envy and Greed must have removed their requests to host.”

“I imagine the Prince of Gluttony’s got quite a bit of food.”

“Not only that. His House is indulgence on every level. Alcohol flows from fountains, clothing is optional in his twilight garden, and trysts are often done in glass rooms lining the ballroom. There is no such thing as clandestine in his world. All is available for consumption: flesh, food, drink, carnal desire, and any manner of vice. This should be quite an event. Did you already know he’d be hosting?”

“This is the first I’ve heard anything. Have you attended one of his parties?”

“No. Last time he hosted, I was too young. I’ve always been curious. Some of the stories have taken on a surreal, fablelike aura. It’s hard to know what’s real and what’s pure fantasy. Especially with what that writer printed about him in her latest royal exposé.”

“I imagine columnists have much inspiration.”

“Oh, they do, and she does in particular. She positively *detests* him. Rumor claims he ruined her cousin’s chance to marry into the nobility, which is why she took up the cursed pen. So much scandal!” She happily sighed, then drew her brows together as if a new thought suddenly rained on her sunny daydream. Her focus moved over the invitation once more. “What fear do you think will be wrenched from your heart?”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure it will be horrible.”

“Maybe we can work on something that won’t be too awfully bad.”

“If only worrying about how to dance at a ball without stepping on toes and causing a scene was my biggest fear.”

My nerves about dancing weren’t exactly a lie. I’d never attended a royal ball or formal dance. We’d only danced at festivals with other people of our station. Everyone here would be watching, judging. It shouldn’t matter what they thought or if they laughed at me, but when I thought of standing there, feeling raw and exposed, my stomach clenched.

“You are a genius!” My friend slowly turned to me, her face splitting into a huge grin. “We can look into a spell or potion for you to take. We will make you *the worst* dancer in all the Seven Circles, worthy of your biggest fear.”

“Fauna,” I warned. “I was only teasing.”

“No, it could work. If you drank a potion to make that fear come

to life in an out-of-proportion way, it's even more likely to be wrenched from you while at a ball."

"And if our ruse is discovered, what then?"

"We'll just have to make sure we use an expert spell or potion."

"Even so, the royals might sense treachery and lies."

"We'll simply need to practice to ensure it's perfect."

"There's no need to worry about that because we're *not* deceiving anyone, Fauna."

"We should ask the Matron if she can—" Fauna dragged her attention away from the invitation and took in my expression. "Oh, angel blood. You look like you're in need of a serious distraction. I have just the place in mind. Come. Let's go at once."

Without giving me a chance to object, she took my arm and raced us from my rooms, the invitation falling from her hand, forgotten for the moment. For her, at least.

Fear beat like a drum against my chest, the rhythm steady and unrelenting. And I suspected it would remain that way until the dreaded feast.

Fauna's idea of a distraction couldn't have been more fitting for me. She half-dragged me through the royal hallways, down several flights of stairs, into the servants' corridor, and finally burst through the doors to a bustling kitchen. I stood there, drinking in the sights and sounds.

The kitchen was bursting with life as the staff prepared tonight's dinner.

Several tables ran down the length of the room, with clusters of workers assigned to different tasks. Some were cutting vegetables, others carving meats, more kneading dough for breads and biscuits. Still more people stood over saucepans and skillets.

Tears threatened, but I choked them down. It would do no good to cry in front of the inner workings of House Wrath.

The cook ran his gaze over us, then nodded to a table near a wall of windows. They'd been thrown open, letting out warmth from the oven fires. "You may use anything you desire, Lady Emilia. If you don't see something you need, simply ask."

"Thank you."

"Thank his highness. He instructed us to secure anything you wished."

"Did he now?" Fauna barely hid her squeal as I walked deeper

inside the room. “How unbelievably thoughtful. Wouldn’t you agree, Lady Emilia?”

“Indeed.”

I glanced around. It was nothing close to our small family restaurant—it was much larger and grand—but still, it felt like home. Against my better judgment, a wave of gratitude washed over me. Wrath had guessed I’d eventually find my way here, to the one place in this realm that would feel familiar to me unlike any other.

I turned back to the head cook. “Thank you for letting me into your kitchen.”

The cook inclined his head, then marched back to bark orders at the line cooks.

Tension melted from my limbs as I opened the icebox and spied a basketful of plump berries. A tub of what suspiciously appeared to be ricotta sat beside them. My mother was the huge talent with dessert in our family, but I’d learned enough to make a rustic pie.

I gathered up all of my supplies and set up my station near the giant window. In moments I already had the pie crust dough sorted and mixed. The berries were quickly rinsed and set on a towel to dry, awaiting the sugar I’d toss them with. Perhaps I’d make custard, too.

Metal clanging on metal drew my attention up. Wrath and Anir darted back and forth outside the window, their swords and daggers clashing like thunder. I couldn’t help but gawk as they charged each other, whipping their weapons through the air. Sparks literally flying upon each contact their blades made.

I gave Fauna an accusatory look. “The kitchen wasn’t the only distraction you had in mind, I see.”

Her grin was too wide to be innocent. She hopped up onto the window’s ledge and snagged a pen and notepad, feigning interest in taking recipe notes as she peered over the pages and watched the two warriors do mock battle. They swung the swords above their heads, their powerful bodies heaving from the exertion of the heavy weapons and the training.

“I have no idea what you mean, my lady. I didn’t know they’d be here.”

“You’re a terrible liar.” I watched as she gazed at Anir, recalling the two of them chatting merrily before Makaden’s tongue removal. “How long have you been in love with him?”

She jerked her attention to mine. “Why would you think I cared for the mortal?”

“You mentioned pining for someone when we first met and haven’t stopped looking at him. I won’t pry if you prefer to keep it a secret now, but I like Anir.” I nodded to the dessert station I set up, giving her a way to evade the topic. “Don’t be afraid to pick up the

rolling pin and help. It doesn't have teeth."

She giggled behind her notepad. "Perhaps not, but have you seen the way the prince is looking at you? It's *his* bite you need to watch out for."

I rolled the dough for the crust with singular focus. I was doing everything in my power to *not* look at him. Of all the places in the entire castle, he simply had to choose this moment to train, in sleeveless leather armor, directly outside the kitchens.

Though I supposed Fauna was equally to blame for this so-called *unexpected* meeting.

"He's got a sweet tooth," I said, realizing she was still waiting for a response. "He's likely looking at the pie."

"Dessert isn't the only thing he looks hungry for, my lady. I wish Anir would gaze upon me with such longing."

"Pursue him."

"Trust me, if he gave any indication he'd be open to my advances, I would pounce. His highness currently seems to be experiencing the same dilemma."

My fiendish attention slid to the window. Torchlight glistened off a sheen of sweat Wrath had worked up wielding his sword. Our gazes clashed in time with the metal of Anir's blade. Fauna was right. Wrath looked like he was working off the magic of our bond. And was losing the battle. He didn't bother hiding his attention.

I promptly went back to rolling the dough, using more concentration than was required.

I could not forget the feeling of the blade sliding into his flesh. I set the rolling pin aside and started on the custard, forcing the silent crunch of bone from my thoughts.

"If I may speak freely, it's no small favor he's granted you."

"What favor?"

"Not insisting you finish the marriage bond. It's all anyone's been talking about."

I hoped the flush in my cheeks would be mistaken for the warmth of the kitchen. How fabulous. The entire court was gossiping about us bedding each other. "This realm certainly needs to learn the difference between choices and favors."

She lifted a shoulder. "Some might argue that you did make a choice, the night you started the betrothal. That he was the one without true choice."

"I find it hard to believe Wrath is tolerant of his court discussing our personal business."

"Your potential position as the princess of this circle is *everyone's* business."

"I—"

“No one blames you, my lady. It’s just… having a co-ruler grants more power to the royals. It secures us from any bored princes in other Houses. Ones who like to stir up trouble on occasion. Princes are immortal, and while most demons live extremely long lives, we are not. Most in the court worry if war comes, our prince will not do all he can for the good of our realm. There are whispers that he may be weakening.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I scoffed. “He is the most powerful prince I’ve met.”

“His power isn’t in question, only his heart. He can seduce you easily enough. Use his influence if necessary. And yet he’s giving you time to decide for yourself.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m having trouble understanding how that is such a foreign concept. Do people in the court really believe he should force me into our marriage? Or bed me against my will? There are laws in the mortal world about that disgusting act.”

“I was not speaking of rape, my lady. That is not tolerated here without Wrath ending the life of the one who dares to take another against their will.” Fauna looked me over. “Don’t appear so shocked. The Seven Circles may be governed by sin, but there are some acts too depraved even for our realm. Punishment for rape is death. Dealt by Wrath’s hand. Other courts favor castration. I promise, if a prince decided to seduce you, especially our prince, you would *choose* to be in his bed of your own accord.”

“And the court is wondering why he isn’t trying to tempt me?”

“Amongst other things.” She lifted a shoulder as I stopped making the custard and stared. “Consider this. If one cuff is frayed on his suit, it sets the courts talking. They believe if a prince cannot be in control of something as simple as his clothing, there is no hope of him caring about those who live in this circle.”

“They must have entirely too much idle time if they’re gossiping about loose threads.”

“It’s never really about the clothing. It’s about the underlying meaning behind *why* the prince would not pay enough attention to, or care about such small details.”

I thought back to how affronted Wrath had been when I’d brought him that old shirt from the marketplace. I’d thought he was simply arrogant and unused to peasant clothing. Now I knew it ran much deeper—if anyone from this realm had seen him, they’d call his rule into question.

“A distracted ruler is dangerous, Emilia. It signals weakness. It makes the denizens aligned with that House of Sin question if they should seek new alliances.”

And the princes of Hell all coveted power. Wrath must want to

complete the bond very badly. But he'd give up the security of his House, the added power, the rumors in court, all so I could have the one thing he coveted above all else: choice.

"He mentioned something about a ceremony also being required. If we…" I drew in a deep breath. "If we were to—"

"—make sweet, passionate, lust-filled love?" Fauna supplied, her face innocent. "Ravage each other until the early morning hours? Scream each other's names as he bends you over and slams his—"

"—yes. That. Our marriage wouldn't be complete until the ceremony was also performed, correct?"

"Correct."

Fauna smiled as if she'd been privy to the direction my thoughts had journeyed. "Whatever may have transpired between you in the past, do not doubt him now. He must respect you enough to damn his own court. No matter how fleeting."

I noticed she hadn't said anything about him caring about or loving me. I wondered if having a husband who respected me would make up for the absence of the other two. Maybe I belonged in House Greed. I didn't think I'd settle for a marriage that did not contain all three.

More troublesome yet… I wasn't sure when I'd started considering taking Wrath as my husband. I was already in the underworld. I would soon meet each prince and have an opportunity to learn some of their secrets. I did not need to marry. And no matter what my feelings might be now, I would not give my family up for anyone. As long as I focused on that, all of my romantic notions would fade away.

Hopefully.

A note scrawled in Wrath's hand arrived later that night.

Training begins at midnight.

Wear the crimson gown.

—W.

I considered ignoring his request, or choosing a pair of trousers and blouse just to prove he neither commanded nor owned me. But

acting out of spite wasn't the road I wanted to travel.

No matter how satisfying it would be to see the glimmer of incredulity on the demanding demon's face, his lessons would ultimately benefit me.

And I would take every advantage I could get my hands on now. The Feast of the Wolf was quickly approaching, and I would be ready to meet the demons on their playing field and crush them at their own game. In the most well-dressed, backstabbing way imaginable.

With a sigh, I fed the note to the flames and went to dress for my training date with Wrath.

TWENTY

“**As soon as** you start to sense the magic’s caress, you must grip your own emotions in a tight fist. You naturally gravitate toward anger; use that initially, if you must.”

Wrath circled me in the weapons room, a predatory gleam in his eyes as he ran his attention over the gown. The consummate hunter stalking his prey. Little did he know, he wasn’t the one who’d set this particular trap. Nor would he be emerging victorious.

Tonight he was definitely more beast than man, especially in matters resembling battle.

With snug leather pants and matching sleeveless armor that buckled up the front, he seemed transformed. This was not the well-mannered prince, presiding over a court of demons. This was the creature made for fighting. And it was the first glimpse I’d had of the battle-scarred warrior outside of his training with Anir earlier tonight.

His teeth flashed in a poor imitation of a smile, furthering my suspicion that he was all animal now. And he liked it. I let my gaze travel over him. Maybe I did, too.

“It will feel like a whisper across your skin. Subtle enough to barely be noticeable. Your free will is all you need to remember. You will not succumb to anyone if you choose not to.”

The atmosphere between us was charged. After he forced me to stab him we weren’t quite on friendly terms, and we weren’t solidly consumed by hatred anymore, either. With him looking like War and me Seduction, things were bound to become interesting during this

lesson.

"So, what you're saying is to focus on my mind and will. Or imagine killing you to maintain command over my emotions. That should be easy enough." I smiled. "If I master tonight's lesson, I think you should agree to grovel before me. In fact, I'd love to see you on your knees, begging."

His attention drifted back over my bodice.

Tiny ribbons laced up the front. I harbored no illusions as to what he'd planned for such a dress, especially if our training was anything close to the last session. He would no doubt use demonic influence on me to undo each and every one of the bows. I wouldn't stop until I stood before him, clad only in the lace undergarments I wore beneath it.

Or maybe those were my own secret desires surfacing. I'd chosen those particular unmentionables with care.

"Greed is interested in wagers. I am not."

"Yet it sounds like your pride will take a blow if I win. Which is why you won't kneel before me. Perhaps you cannot stomach the idea of surrendering to anyone. Even your potential future wife."

"Make no mistake, Emilia. When I go to my knees before you, it will be to conquer, not surrender. If you harbor any doubts, I shall enjoy proving you wrong. Now unbuckle my armor."

His statement was laced with magical command.

I felt the slight tingling sensation he'd described as his demonic influence sought to take hold of my emotions, bending them to the demon prince's will. I was halfway across the weapons room before I shook myself out of the sinful grip. A tiny thrill went through me. I didn't need my magic to fight against him. Only my will.

"Unbuckle my armor, *now*. Then take your blade to my belt and cut it off."

This time, Wrath used the full strength of his power. Magic caressed me, urged me forward. His armor was undone and discarded in seconds.

I slipped my hand beneath my gown and removed the dagger hidden there in one swift motion. The blade was to his belt by the time I regained control.

Wrath's mouth pressed into a firm line. "You're distracted."

"I can't imagine why." I pretended to think on it. "Maybe it has to do with the invitation I received for the Feast of the Wolf. I've heard Gluttony's parties are legendary for their debauchery."

"Most gatherings are laden with sin and vice. It's the way of this realm, and why we're training. But that's not what you're worried about."

"I thought I was to have some small say in where the feast was

thrown." I fiddled with the dagger. "I don't—I'm not looking forward to it."

"You'll be able to sense any emotional manipulation by then. And you will be equipped to break free of their influence should they behave poorly."

"It's not that, either."

He scanned my face. "It won't be pleasant, but it won't be the worst thing you'll live through."

"As always, you are exceptional with easing nerves. I…" I shook my head, then bent to replace my dagger in my thigh sheath. "It's not just the fear being ripped from me."

"My brothers will not hurt you."

"I don't know how to dance."

His brows raised. "You won't be forced to dance if you don't want to."

I didn't meet his gaze. Dancing would allow me an opportunity to spend time with each of his brothers. I imagined there would be some talking involved, and I didn't want my lack of refinement to impede my mission. Since I no longer could attempt to spell the wine, dancing and sipping a refreshment after would be perfect for conversation.

"You're probably right." I forced a smile. "It's silly to worry about."

Wrath didn't respond right away. He cocked his head to the side, eyes narrowed. "You danced at the bonfire the night you encountered Lust. You were magnificent then. I don't see why you'll have any trouble with a waltz."

I lifted a shoulder and turned my attention back to the table near us. Several strange daggers had been neatly lined up. They were solid black with one long piece cut out in the center of the hilt and the blade.

"Eight-inch throwing knives." Wrath moved to the table and plucked up a knife. "They are solid steel with a smooth handle as to not disturb your grip and are weighted in the front to make throwing more accurate. Would you like to practice?"

I ran a finger over the cool metal. "Yes."

"Take it by the bottom. We'll work on a spin technique."

I held it by the handle and aimed for the wooden target Wrath indicated at the far end of this section of the weapons rooms. It flew through the air, landing left of center, and fell to the ground. The demon prince nodded and handed me another blade. "The knife didn't stick because you're standing too close."

"How can you tell that?"

"When it spins, if the blade is angled down when it falls, it indicates you need to step back. Half of throwing knives and getting

them to reach your target is all about where you're standing."

I shifted my stance, then repeated the steps. This time the hit came to the right of the red circle and stuck. A deep sense of elation went through me.

I held my hand out, waiting for the next blade, and was surprised to feel Wrath's fingers wrapping around mine instead. I twisted, confused.

"What are—"

"We're starting a new lesson." He gently pulled me closer. "Place one hand on my shoulder. And hold lightly to this one. Good." He angled our bodies, then straightened to his full height. "The movements are simple. We'll be dancing in a box shape. Step back on the ball of your right foot, and follow with your left. Keep them a foot apart as we move."

"We can't dance here."

"Of course we can."

We struck an odd pair. Without his armor, Wrath's chest was bare, his leather pants molded to his form, and I was dressed in crimson silk. He didn't seem to mind. He acted as if he were in the finest evening attire, too.

The warrior prince guided us slowly through the steps, keeping us shoulder-width apart as we swept back, to the sides and forward in a loose interpretation of a box.

I watched our feet, worried I'd step on his or get tangled up in his legs.

"Tilt your chin up so you can gaze adoringly into my eyes." He grinned down at my scowl. "I want you to focus on how handsome I am, how talented at dancing *and* killing, and forget everything else. Except for how much you want to kiss me."

I couldn't help myself; I laughed. "You're incorrigible."

"Perhaps." His voice turned low and seductive as his hand slid down to the small of my back, drawing me a little closer. "But you're waltzing like a goddess now."

The warmth of him, his praise, the hard muscle beneath my fingertips… all had me swaying nearer. Wrath placed his lips against my ear. "You're—"

"Is this a godsdamn ballroom now?" Anir propped himself against the doorjamb, arms crossed. A lazy grin spread across his face as he batted his lashes. "Will you be teaching this new technique to all of the soldiers, your highness, or just us pretty ones?"

With what appeared to be immense effort, Wrath tore his gaze from me, but didn't release us from our position. "A good fighter is skilled in weapons. A great fighter is skilled in dance. Perhaps I'll appoint you as the new dance master."

“While that sounds titillating, I do come with news from the dungeon.” Anir pushed himself up from the spot where he’d casually leaned, his expression serious. “It’s the mortal.”

Wrath tensed. “What happened?”

Anir’s attention slid to me. “He’s asking for Emilia.”

“Antonio?” I stepped away from Wrath, heart thundering. “He’s here?”

TWENTY-ONE

I expected the dungeons of House Wrath to be subterranean. Unending darkness broken only by meager bits of torchlight set along desolate corridors. Stones damp with piss and other foul odors of the forgotten and damned permeating the very essence of the chambers. Screams of the tortured souls who were abominable enough to find themselves imprisoned in Hell. I'd convinced myself the wailing I'd heard out in the gardens originated from the cells.

Reality was much different.

We climbed a wide stone staircase in a tower, the air crisp and clean, while light poured in through a series of arched windows set high above. A lovely wooden door greeted us at the top. There were no guards stationed outside. No weapons trained on the murderer who was waiting—just beyond the pale stone walls—for his audience with the prince and possible princess of this House of Sin.

I gave Wrath an incredulous look. "You've left him unguarded?"

"The door is magicked shut. And also locks from the outside." He placed his palm against the wood and it clicked open. "It's spelled to open for the both of us."

I blinked slowly. I seemed to have lost the ability to speak. Wrath either trusted me more than he let on, or he didn't consider me a threat. It was foolish on his part to underestimate me.

I walked into the room and halted.

Antonio sat in a plush leather chair with a book and a steaming cup of tea placed on a low table next to him. A throw blanket was

spread across his lap. He was in an alcove that overlooked the snowcapped mountains of the realm. An ebony river slithered through the land like a giant snake. The view was breathtaking, and the room was far better than the dormitory of the holy brotherhood. This prison cell was the height of cozy comfort.

I wasn't certain I was breathing.

Antonio glanced up at our arrival, his brown eyes warm and friendly. Gone was the previous hatred he'd gazed upon me with. The disgust.

"Emilia. You came."

An overwhelming wave of anger washed over me at the sight of his smile. The soft tone of his voice. Here was the human blade who had killed my twin, lounging with a book and a warm drink. As if he was on a lovely respite from the holy brotherhood instead of suffering for his crimes. Wrath had been wise after all, keeping his location secret from me.

I was halfway across the room before Wrath's arms circled my waist and lifted me in the air. His touch did little to soothe the fire in my veins.

I kicked out, trying to land a blow on the despicable human.

"Drop me at once! I'm going to murder him!"

Wrath held me against his body without giving any quarter. I bucked against him, wild with fury that was spiraling beyond control. In the back of my mind, I knew my reaction was extreme, but I had lost the ability to see reason.

All I could see was red.

The red of anger and the crimson of my twin's blood, puddled on the hard ground. Staining my hands as I slipped over it and lost any remaining sense of peace I'd know. Now I would take from him until he had nothing left. Until he met Vittoria's same fate. I'd rip his damned heart from his chest with my teeth if I had to.

Antonio dropped the book and pressed himself deep into the chair, his eyes wide. The only thing standing between him and a vicious attack was the demon. Irony was located in there.

"Do you recall what I said about your anger, my lady?"

The prince's low voice held a hint of teasing that doused the blazing inferno of rage. The fight left my body, only to be replaced by a different sort of tension.

Without letting me go, Wrath maneuvered us out into the corridor and kicked the door shut behind us. He carefully set me on my feet, my back against the cool stone, his arms casually placed on either side of my body.

A glimmer of amusement shone in his eyes as I leveled a glare at him.

“Master your temper, or we’ll attempt this again tomorrow.”

“This was a test.”

“You’re failing miserably.”

Like he surmised I would. I inhaled deeply through my nose, then exhaled through my mouth. Just as he’d done the night we fought over the enchanted skulls. I repeated the exercise twice more before my emotions settled. “I’m calm now.”

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “I find it fascinating that you continue to lie to my face, knowing full well I can sense each untruth. Rage makes for messy battle strategies. If you cannot control your fury, you risk getting hurt.”

“Fine. I’m calm*er*. Though not for long if you keep poking at me.”

“That creates quite the mental imagery.”

And just as he’d intended, I was suddenly no longer thinking of murder, anger, or rage. A new pulse pounded through me that had little to do with my heart. My attention dropped to his wicked lips, noting the tantalizing curve of them. He hadn’t used an ounce of magic or influence. This lust-filled emotion belonged only to me. And this realm and our provocative marriage bond.

Or maybe he wasn’t the only one whose anger swiftly turned into passion.

Maybe it was an aphrodisiac for me, too. “You’re wholly inappropriate.”

“Lie.” Wrath moved slowly, placing his body flush against mine. The physical contact was a welcome distraction from the anger still simmering inside me. I focused on the demon, on the heat not originating in fury. “I am your intended. And a living embodiment of sin, as you once called me. A certain amount of inappropriate behavior should be expected. Especially when the future princess of House Wrath is so appealing.”

“You are a heathen. I just tried to murder a man.”

“Precisely.” He pressed his lips to my cheek. “Are you ready to try again?”

“To murder him?”

“I suggest talking, but you are free, as always, to choose your path.”

“Murder, or at least a good thrashing, then.”

“Try.” Challenge rang in the single word. “We’ll just end up out here again.”

As if that was a deterrent. “You trust me?”

“It’s more important for you to trust yourself.” He pushed back from the wall. “Only you can decide how to move forward. What would you like to do?”

Dangerous question. I would like to open the murderer from gut

to gullet and watch his stinking, steaming entrails spill across the floor. That answer wouldn't get me back inside. And, no matter how I'd felt moments before, I did not want to become someone I could no longer respect. Murdering a man, even one who'd violently killed my twin, would only put me on his level. Which was why Wrath had made me take the dagger to him the other night.

I knew how it felt, hurting someone. Blood would not stain my hands. Today.

Wrath waited silently, giving me time and space to decide my next move. His expression was perfectly bland, offering no judgment. No hint to his inner thoughts.

I rolled my shoulders, releasing the tension. "I'm ready to ask him about my sister."

"Emilia." Antonio jumped to his feet. "It's good to see you."

His tone indicated what he actually meant was "It's good to see you no longer snarling and kicking like a rabid beast trying to rip out my throat."

This meeting was young, though. There was still time for snarling and snapping. The leash I'd put on myself was already slipping. I did not return his tentative smile. Just because I'd decided against gutting him did not mean we would ever be friends again.

I moved carefully into the small tower chamber, feeling Wrath close behind. His trust only went so far, apparently. Smart demon.

"Is it? I would imagine initially it was like staring into the face of one of your victims. Only to discover they weren't dead after all."

There was a beat of silence that fell awkwardly between us.

"I cannot… words and apologies will never be enough to make up for what I did to you."

"What you did to Vittoria."

"O-of course." His throat bobbed. I almost believed the emotion was real. "I've been taking a tonic." He indicated the steaming mug on the small table. "The matron is talented with breaking enchantments."

I paused in the center of the room. Wrath was a shadow looming in my periphery. "Is that what you're claiming now? Magic was the true villain, not your hatred?"

Antonio watched me closely as he settled back onto his chair, his gaze never once straying to the demon prince behind me. He did not know I was unable to use magic, that my threats were all bark and no bite. His fear did something to me. Made me want to strike harder.

“Do you recall my trip to the village? Where they claimed a goddess was feasting with wolves in the spirit realm, and teaching them ways to protect themselves from evil?”

“Let me guess.” My tone turned frosty. “You’re claiming a goddess actually descended upon that village and was the one who cursed you?”

“Emilia, my god.” He looked affronted. “I didn’t…”

“You expected forgiveness? Unearned mercy? You murdered my twin. You killed other innocent women. Instead of taking responsibility for your actions, you’re telling me superstitious stories. Ones you were only too happy to claim as silly and unfounded, if I recall. Own your truth, admit your wrongs, and do not waste my time with old folktales or lies.”

I spun on my heel and headed back to the door. I didn’t trust the growing darkness of my temper. Wrath moved aside and let me pass, his expression still unreadable.

I turned at the threshold and looked at the man I’d once believed I’d loved. How young and foolish I’d been then. Antonio had devoted his life to the holy order and would never be half as honorable as the prince of Hell standing beside him.

“When you regain all of your memories, or whatever it is you’re claiming the matron is helping you with, send for me then. But if you lie to me again, I will come for you. I will rip out your heart and feed it to the hellhounds. Wrath cannot stand guard and protect you forever.”

Antonio pressed his lips together. “I know I must earn your forgiveness. Please, Emilia. Please visit me again soon. Let me prove I am trustworthy.”

Hell was already frozen over, so I didn’t point out it would take it thawing into the Garden of Eden for me to willingly seek out his friendship again.

I left Wrath in the tower and rushed back to my chambers, heading straight into the bathing room. I needed to soak away the experience of being in Antonio’s filthy presence. I’d made it to the glass stool near my vanity when I heard the faint knock. “Come in.”

“My lady, I’m Harlow. I’m to tend to you when you need assistance.”

I glanced up from where I sat, pinning up my long hair. A young demon maid—with lavender skin and snow-colored hair—nervously

stood in the doorway. I took a deep breath and released it. I refused to let my bad mood taint the rest of my evening.

"It's lovely to meet you, Harlow. You don't need to trouble yourself, though. I can manage preparing for my bath." She bit her lip, eyes darting to the sunken tub. I wondered if my refusal came across as an insult instead of an attempt at being friendly. I forced a smile. "If you could add some oils and soap to the water, that would be nice."

"Straight away." Harlow rushed into the room, her expression brightening. "I'll go fetch a length of linen and leave it on the side for you to dry off after you bathe, Lady Emilia."

"Thank you."

The maid bobbed a quick curtsy, then exited the room. I knew Wrath had said that servants didn't expect to be thanked for their jobs, but it felt strange to ignore anyone's efforts at bringing comfort. She tended to the water, laid out the linen towel, then quietly left me alone.

I slipped the silk dressing gown off my shoulders and hung it on a crystal hook near the vanity. Candles in the chandelier flickered with my movements, adding a sense of serenity to the already lovely bathing room.

After the burst of fury that had consumed all rational thought brought on by Antonio, this was exactly what I needed. Time to simply breathe and soak and let go of the anger.

I stepped down into the warm water, the perfumed oils rising up with the steam. Between the aches that crept up from my lessons with Anir and the tension that had coiled in my body from Antonio, the water felt like heaven.

I submerged myself up to my neck, leaning back against the lip of the enormous sunken tub. I was trying to empty my mind and emotions. Each time I replayed what Antonio said about the goddess and the shape-shifters, I felt that unsettling murderous rage flare up.

Once the initial fury passed, I tried to pick it apart. I didn't believe him. But perhaps he *hadn't* been influenced by a demon. It was possible a witch crossed his path and pretended to be a goddess. Or was it a matter of two mortals being influenced with demon magic? Maybe the person who came to him as the angel of death had been another victim. It would be clever of the demon to never actually be seen by Antonio. Then he'd never be able to identify them.

After my lessons with Wrath, I knew how hard it was to fight off a magical attack, but I still found forgiveness and sympathy to be out of reach. Part of me hated to admit that, even to myself. When I got that furious… it felt as if I left my body and all sense of humanity was replaced with elemental rage. I sunk against the tub, drained both

emotionally and physically.

I must have drifted off; the sound of the door creaking open jarred me awake.

No footsteps or sounds of the maid's return rustled in the suite.

An uncomfortable feeling prickled along my skin. I was not alone in the chamber. Someone was watching me. Someone who was not identifying themselves.

"Harlow?"

A length of linen tightened around my neck. My fingers flew to the material as my airflow ceased. I thrashed in the tub, splashing water in violent waves. A strangled sound escaped my lips, but it wasn't loud enough to alert anyone of the assassination attempt. My throat burned, white spots filtered in at the edge of my vision. Panic made me buck.

Then I remembered the one item I hadn't removed for my bath.

My hand shot below the water and emerged with the slim dagger Wrath had gifted me. With one final burst of energy, I thrust my arm back and felt vicious glee as the blade sunk into soft flesh. The intruder gasped and dropped the garrote.

In the seconds it took for me to wrench the fabric from my throat and spin around, they were gone. The only sign that anything had happened was the obscene amount of blood leading to the door. I calmly got to my feet and pulled on a dressing gown. Then I called for a servant to fetch Wrath. All the while my pulse pounded in my ears. Someone had tried to murder me. And I'd stabbed them. Someplace vital if the amount of blood on the floor was any indication.

I couldn't muster an ounce of regret. Or perhaps I was simply numb from shock.

One thing didn't escape my notice, though. Thanks to Envy's curse for stealing the book of spells, I had no magic to defend myself against the attack. No power aside from the physical blow I'd struck with the dagger.

Wrath appeared in a cloud of smoke and glittering black light, rage etched into his ice-cold features. "Are you injured?"

"No." I pointed to the blood on the tile. "But the same isn't true for the assailant."

Wrath scanned me first, his attention catching on my neck. His expression turned thunderous. I imagined a red welt was forming. The very foundation of the castle vibrated.

"Do you wish to accompany me?"

I glanced at my hands, at the dagger I still held, coated in blood. Perhaps it made me weak, but I couldn't bring myself to witness what was about to occur. I shook my head, not meeting Wrath's gaze. If there were a House Cowardice, I'd probably be queen of it.

“It takes enormous strength to acknowledge your limits, Emilia.” His hand trailed from my temple to my chin, then gently lifted it so I looked at him. “A true leader delegates. Just as you’re doing now. Never doubt your courage. I certainly don’t.”

Dropping his hand from my face, Wrath finally glanced at the blood.

He prowled toward it, an almighty predator on the hunt, and didn’t utter another word before he disappeared, House dagger gripped in hand, looking like a nightmare made flesh.

And, to whoever had just attacked me in his House, I supposed that’s exactly what he was. May the goddesses grant the assailant a swift death—Wrath certainly wouldn’t.

TWENTY-TWO

I took a loaf of bread from a tray of freshly baked offerings and brought it to my oversized wooden cutting board. Two heads of garlic, a generous portion of basil, pecorino, pignoli, and olive oil all joined my station. The cook was just finishing up when I'd arrived and informed me that Wrath had the ingredients brought in from the mortal world for me.

Apparently, he'd also had seeds purchased and planted in the castle's greenhouse so I'd have all my familiar herbs and vegetables at my disposal. A touch of magic helped them along, according to the cook, and there was a veritable bounty awaiting me whenever I'd like to tour the indoor garden. I rooted around in the icebox and pulled out a hunk of what tasted like goat cheese, then donned an apron I'd found hanging on a peg with an army of clean linens.

Cooking relaxed me. When I was in a kitchen my problems faded away. There was only me and a dish, the scents and sounds and satisfaction of creating something nurturing and delicious overtaking all else. There were no murders. No lost loved ones. No liars or secret keepers. I knew nothing of assassination attempts or marriages brought about by a spell gone wrong. I felt joy, peace. And serenity was something I desperately needed at the moment.

I cut off the top of one head of garlic, exposing all of the cloves, drizzled olive oil over them, covered it with a tin can, then placed it in the oven to roast. I turned my attention to the basil, pine nuts, garlic, and olive oil.

Chopping, mixing, pouring all of my love and energy into the sauce, erasing the rest of the night from my thoughts. It wasn't denial, only a brief respite I sought.

I'd just finished making pesto when I felt his presence. I continued working, waiting for him to speak. I didn't know whether I was eager for him to have found my attacker, or if I suddenly wanted to pretend the night hadn't happened at all. When several moments passed, I finally glanced up. "Is there something you needed to tell me?"

Wrath leaned against the end of the table I worked at, his arms and feet crossed. The picture of casual calm. I noticed he'd changed into a new shirt and his hair was slightly damp. "There is little I need. But much I want."

"I'm not going back to that room tonight."

"I didn't ask you to." He straightened and moved to my side, nodding at the loaf of bread. "May I help?"

I peered at him from the corner of my eye. "There's not much left to do, but you can pour us some wine. Red would be nice."

"Red it is."

He left and returned a breath later, bottle and glasses in hand. He rummaged in the icebox and brought over a container of blackberries. After uncorking the bottle, he added a few berries to each glass, then set mine next to where I sliced bread.

I laid the bread slices on a baking sheet and drizzled olive oil across the tops. I set them inside the oven and adjusted the little timer before taking a sip of wine. Wrath clinked his glass against mine, his gaze content. "May we always feast after spilling the blood of our enemies."

I smiled at him over my glass. "You're a barbarian."

"You defended yourself. If being proud makes me a barbarian, so be it."

"Do you think I killed him?"

He swirled the liquid in his glass, his attention riveted to it. "Would it matter if you did?"

"Of course it matters. I don't want to be a murderer."

"Defending yourself is not the same as attacking without cause or reason."

"Which, by your refusal to answer, I'm assuming means I did."

"You do not bear the burden of that demon's death, Emilia." Wrath set his glass down and faced me, his expression hard. "I do." The smile that tipped up the edges of his mouth was not warm or friendly. It was cold, calculating. Designed to frighten, to call forth fear and seduce it. "Here I am, the very essence of evil and sin. Am I the monster you feared?"

I looked at him—really, truly looked. There was nothing overtly

indicative of his emotions in his face, but there was *something* in the way he'd asked the question that made me carefully formulate my response. He did not want me to think he was a monster.

And, goddess curse me, I didn't. I met and held his gaze. "Did he suffer?"

"Not nearly enough."

"Were you able to get information from him?"

Wrath shook his head. "His tongue was recently severed. It appears to have been a choice he made, likely in case he was caught."

I don't know what madness came over me, but I put my wine down and moved to where Wrath stood rigidly, awaiting judgment. Slowly, as if approaching an animal ready to bolt, I wound my arms around his waist and laid my head against his chest.

For several long moments, he barely breathed. Then, he wrapped his arms around me and rested his chin atop my head. We stayed there, holding each other, until the little windup clock dinged. Even then I didn't let go right away. This demon, this living embodiment of sin, was so much more than the monster he was supposed to be.

I pulled back gradually, and rolled up onto my toes, pressing my lips to his cheek in a chaste kiss. "Thank you."

Without giving him an opportunity to respond, I hurried to the oven and removed the toast and roasted garlic. I placed them both on the cutting board, then added the hunk of goat cheese and the bowl of pesto. I grabbed two small dishes and stuck a butter knife near each item on the board. I smiled down at my work, pleased beyond measure with the outcome.

"You'll have to serve yourself, but it's easy." I took a slice of toast and smeared a few roasted garlic cloves across it like jam. "Next spread some goat cheese on top of the garlic. And finally"—I added a generous spoonful of pesto—"top it off with the pesto."

Wrath watched me work, then picked up a slice of toast and made his. He took a bite and his attention slid to me. "I think I like this almost more than the sweets you made."

"That's high praise indeed, coming from the cannoli king." I grinned at him. "Sometimes I'll add a poached egg if I have any leftovers from breakfast or lunch. Vittoria likes to—"

I abruptly stopped speaking and set my snack aside.

Wrath lightly touched my elbow, drawing me back to the present. "What is it?"

"I miss her."

"Your twin."

"Yes, desperately. Sometimes, for a second, I forget she's gone. Then it all comes back. Part of me feels terrible for forgetting. And the other part wants to lash out. Lately it seems like I'm at war with

myself, and I can't decide which part will win."

"I have no personal experience with death, but I know that's normal for some mortals."

"I wonder, though." I looked him in the eye. "I've been consumed with rage and anger since her murder. The intensity of those emotions doesn't scare me, which *does* frighten me. I never used to be like this. Then tonight… tonight, when that demon tried to kill me, I wasn't scared. I was furious. I wanted to inflict pain. One of my first thoughts after the fact wasn't terror, it was anger that I hadn't been taught dark magic."

"Your mortal family should have taught you to protect yourself."

I inhaled deeply. I might as well lay all of my fears out. After the events of the evening, I needed to purge the dark feelings from my whole person. "Sometimes I worry that it's not the devil who's cursed. But me."

Wrath went still. "Why would you believe that?"

"My twin was murdered. My grandmother attacked. My parents were held hostage by Envy. And yet what has happened to me? Aside from tonight's assassination attempt, I mean." I searched his face for answers. "Maybe I'm cursed and everyone I love is in danger. What if I'm the villain? One who's so vicious, so terrible, I was punished to forget? What if the witches who were murdered started to remember? Maybe I am the monster and I don't even know it."

Wrath was silent for an uncomfortably long time. When I'd started to feel foolish for sharing so many fears with him, he said softly, "Or maybe they all dabbled in pursuits they shouldn't have. And you're the one picking up the pieces of their mistakes."

Demonberry wine dribbled over my chin and spilled onto my sleeveless gown, but I didn't stop guzzling it from the bottle to bother wiping the mess from my face. The magical sensation holding me in its thrall vanished. I set the bottle down, seriously contemplating throwing it across the table. Wrath gave me a smug grin.

He'd had a large, gilded table and two plush chairs brought into the weapons room. More thrones that weren't thrones. Complete with metal serpents—not quite gold or silver, but in between—making up the outer rim of the seats.

Gold platters of fruits and desserts and whipped creams and rich, savory foods covered every inch of the cloth-covered table. Some dishes towered so high they toppled over, spilling onto the floor. It

was a despicable waste.

I shook my head. “This is shameful.”

“The puppies will feast like royalty.”

“Puppies.” I snorted. “You mean those three-headed hellhounds?”

“Need I remind you that *you* asked for us to train. Stop avoiding the lesson.”

“Considering the fact I do not drink to excess, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be learning from this little session. There must be something more useful you can teach me.”

“Allow me to try harder to prove the point.”

I should have known better than to assume the prince would take it easy on me during our training session the next night. He seemed to toy with lust, envy, wrath, and sloth the most, but tonight he exposed me to the sin of gluttony. Everything from my clothing, to the jewels I wore, to the rich meal we’d picked at, to the wine I drank spoke of overindulgence.

I *had* sent him a note, requesting our lessons to resume. After the assassination attempt, I was even more determined to protect myself from the demon princes. I was struggling to find the value in drinking wine to excess, and how that skill was going to aid my endeavors.

Wrath poured an enormous goblet and handed it to me. It was the third time he’d done so. And that wasn’t counting the two bottles of demonberry wine I’d already consumed over the last hour or two.

It was getting harder to fight off the demonic influence, or even sense that slight tingle that indicated magic was being used on me. I inhaled deeply, breathing through the wave of dizziness. I’d only ever gotten drunk on wine once before, but I recognized the signs.

“Drink this all as quickly as you can. Then pour another and do the same.”

His magic grazed the back of my senses. I gritted my teeth and focused on how annoyed I was. He grinned over a platter of chocolate-covered berries. Then his power overwhelmed me.

I held it at bay for another strained moment, then gulped down the goblet.

My head spun and my vision doubled. I swiped at my mouth, grinning like an idiot, and poured another drink. Wine sloshed from the goblet onto the floor. My silk slippers looked like I’d been traipsing through a murder scene, but I couldn’t care less.

The more he influenced me to drink, the more impossible it was becoming to concentrate on my free will. Which, through my drunken stupor, finally made sense.

His brothers could nudge me toward drinking, and in turn, a slow inebriation would make it nearly impossible to stave off their influence. The more out of control I became, the easier it would be for

them to slip past my defenses. Wrath had a point after all.

He wasn't just trying to have me fight off gluttony.

I pushed out of my seat and tripped my way over to the demon's side of the table, the empty glass dangling from my fingertips. He'd had me dress in a long, extravagant silver gown made of silk. It was luxurious to the point of excess. I wore no undergarments and the material did not hide any part of my form. With the wine soaking through the front of the bodice, I might as well have been waltzing around naked. I doubted he'd planned for that.

Wrath hadn't so much as dropped his gaze below my neckline. Ever the proper gentleman. At least when he wasn't ripping out tongues or torturing would-be assassins to death.

Heavy strands of diamonds hung around my neck. There were so many in varying lengths, it felt as if I was carrying an extra five pounds around my throat. It was so excessive, even Envy would be appalled instead of jealous.

I leaned precariously over Wrath, my face close to his. I wanted to kiss him. Possibly break a bottle and stab him first. But then definitely kiss him.

"You're getting me drunk on purpose." I gave him what I thought was a saucy grin. "Naughty demon."

"Being under the influence of alcohol or other substances will greatly reduce your ability to sense a prince of Hell's magic. Especially Gluttony's. He will push you to drink little by little until you lose control and he can take over." His tone turned harsh. "You need to fight back."

I was trying to pay attention to the lesson, but I was fascinated by the shape of his lips when he spoke. I reached over and touched them. He pressed them into a firm line.

"Emilia. Focus."

"Oh, I promise I am. I am *extremely* focused at the moment. Enthralled. Or is it enchanted?" I drew my attention up. There were two of him, glowering. I blinked until only one annoyed demon remained. "Why haven't you seduced me?"

It was difficult to be sure, but I thought he removed his influence.

"If you cannot battle through the haze of alcohol, then it's best to avoid drinking anything at the feast. You may accept a toast, but only pretend to sip it."

"You worry too much." I smoothed the furrow between his brows. "Nonna says all of the steam from the kitchen will keep wrinkles away. Vittoria and I will remain ageless. Like you."

"Considering you're not human, I imagine there's truth in that."

"You never answered my question. About seduction." I swayed a little on my feet. His lap looked comfortable enough. I plopped onto

it. His body tensed, but he didn't lift me. I internally grinned at that small victory. "Fauna said the whole court would like to know."

"Lady Fauna talks too much. Perhaps I ought to insist she visit a distant relative."

"Don't take your foul mood out on her; she was only passing along gossip to me. And I'd like to know, too. Maybe I want you to seduce me now." I leaned on his shoulder and rested my chin in my palm, gazing at him. Belatedly, I realized I must look like a mad person, staring the way I was in our current position. "You know, some believe avoidance is a sign of cowardice."

"I'm aware of what you're doing, and it won't work." His scowl deepened. "I am not seducing you because I currently do not wish to. It's as simple as that."

If he'd stuck *me* in the heart with a knife, it might hurt less.

I twisted around and pulled the plate of chocolate-covered berries to me. I added a dollop of whipped cream to them and speared one with a fork. I missed. The fork connected with the dish. A berry catapulted across the table. Goddess-cursed things.

It was definitely their tiny, round forms, and not my current state of inebriation.

I took aim and squinted at the plate. Berries were swimming. They were no match for me. I aimed again and another berry went flying. I swore roundly.

Wrath's deep exhale tickled my bare shoulder as he reached around and took the fork from me. He stabbed a chocolate-covered berry and swirled it into the whipped cream.

He paused with the fork to my mouth.

"If you so much as breathe *one* word of this, I vow revenge, my lady."

"Very well. Though I doubt I'll even remember this extreme act of chivalry in the morning."

I leaned against his shoulder, head thrown back, and waited for him to feed me the dessert. With only a fraction of hesitation, he did. I swore the food tasted sweeter. I felt like a pampered Roman goddess as he fed me one decadent berry at a time.

"Mmm. I can hardly recall a word of what we were saying already."

"Liar." He set the fork down and brought his mouth close to my ear, suddenly taking the lobe between his teeth. Heat spread through me and my toes curled from the sensation. I wasn't sure if Wrath had done it, but any inebriation I felt vanished. "Then again, so am I. In a sense."

TWENTY-THREE

Wrath trailed a line of searing kisses down my neck, igniting my desire.

The chocolate-covered berries were forgotten. There was a new indulgence being served. And I'd gladly take my fill of this pleasant delight. I'd asked for seduction, and the prince was delivering. His hands drifted along the silhouette of my body, pausing to rest on my waist.

It didn't feel possessive as much as it seemed like he was holding himself in check. Or maybe he was contemplating clever ways to slowly torture me. He fiddled with the clasp on one of my necklaces. The excessive strands of diamonds were hardly a barrier, but I wanted them gone all the same. I wanted nothing between us.

He brought his mouth to my body again and my mind emptied of all else.

I tossed my head back, lost in ecstasy as his tongue smoothed over the sharp little nip he'd given me. He pulled me against him, his teeth now lightly scraping where my shoulder and neck connected. Chills danced over my body in the most tantalizing way. This feeling… it was not sinful, as mortals tried teaching their daughters. It was natural. Blissful. If it was socially acceptable for Wrath to take a lover, then the same right should be afforded to me.

After all, there were two people involved in such encounters.

I arched into his touch. I owned this desire, enjoyed it. And it did not make me lustful or wanton. It made me feel human, in control of

my wants. Denying my passions no longer.

I braced myself with a hand on each of his thighs, gripping him as he lavished all his attention and kisses on my neck, my shoulders. I wanted to spin around and face him, needing to explore his body as languidly. For some reason, even with my newfound conviction, I hesitated.

"Is there something you want from me, my lady?"

"You don't have to call me that when we're alone. There's no need for a show."

He smiled against my neck. "Any other requests?"

"I…"

"Assert your wants. You need not apologize for them."

"Even if I want you to stop?"

"Especially then."

"Take my diamonds off. Please."

The prince undid each strand of precious stones, letting them clink to the ground.

"I'm curious." His voice was velvet soft as he leaned in and removed the final necklace. "About the Sin Corridor. What you experienced that night you called out my name. Tell me."

There was no magical command or demonic thrall attached to his request. Only genuine curiosity. I realized the feeling of dizziness brought on by drinking was also gone. I was no longer under the influence of anything, save being drunk on my own passions, and hadn't been since before he first kissed me.

Maybe it was our current position—the fact I didn't have to see his face—that made my confession easier. Or perhaps I simply did not wish to feel guilt or shame regarding my body and the things I wanted and craved. I gathered up my courage, knowing precisely where this admission would lead. Praying for it to travel that path, really.

"You were… you were behind me, like this. Except we were lying down."

He rewarded my honesty with a gentle stroke along my arm. "And?"

"I was wearing your shirt and you were unbuttoning it. So slowly I was going mad."

"I imagine you demanded I remove it." His fingertips ghosted across my shoulder, then my clavicle, before dipping lower, teasing the skin exposed above my décolletage. My breath hitched as he paused his ministrations, one hand slipping beneath a strap of my gown. Only the thin scrap of silk stood between us. "And I obliged. Is that correct?"

"More or less."

"Would you like me to do the same now?" With only the slightest

pause, I nodded. “I need to hear the words, Emilia. Do you wish for me to stop?”

“No.” My grip on his thighs tightened as if I could keep him there forever. “No, I do not.”

He moved my hair aside and leaned back in his chair, allowing enough space between us for him to lightly massage my shoulders. Gripping one strap in each hand, he pressed his lips to my spine, kissing me there as he slipped the top of my gown off.

Cool air blew across my flushed skin.

“What happened next?”

Fantasy and reality were colliding. My breaths quickened in anticipation. “You wanted me to tell you that you are my favorite sin.”

His chuckle was low, deep. It made me ache for him all the more. “Am I?”

“At the moment, yes.”

“You didn’t confess it then.”

I heard the question even though he hadn’t phrased it that way.

“No.” My eyes fluttered shut before I opened them again. “You started touching me and I could think of nothing else.”

He nuzzled the back of my neck before reaching around to cup my breasts. Heat shot through me. His fingers traced the outer curves, circling closer to the peaks in the center. When he brushed across them, they hardened. My breath caught as I sunk my teeth into my lower lip. I inched back, craving more of his heat, and noticed how affected he was.

“Tell me what I did in your illusion that made you call for me.”

I flushed. There was no way I’d tell him about *that* part. I closed my eyes and gathered my resolve, forcing myself to not be embarrassed. With renewed confidence I allowed myself the freedom of letting go. “You were gently pulling me against your arousal and your hand slipped under my skirts. You touched me. There. With your fingers.”

“Did it feel as it did in the Crescent Shallows?”

“Almost. It felt incredible, for a mere moment. Then I awoke.”

“Before you climaxed?”

“I… believe so.”

“Allow me the honor of making that up to you now.”

He didn’t move right away, and I realized he was waiting for my consent. Wrath would never take without permission. “Please.”

“With pleasure.”

He slipped one hand beneath the silk gown and his light touch slid over my calf, against my inner thigh, then slowly traced circular patterns there, roving a bit higher with each daring stroke, until I could no longer stand it. I stopped pressing my knees together and he

dragged a finger across the apex of my body. It felt better than the Sin Corridor and Crescent Shallows combined.

Wrath pressed me forward until I was nearly bent over him, then trailed kisses down my spine. My skin tingled with each pass of his lips. All the while his fingers teased and danced across my body, driving me into a frenzy.

Once I was convinced I'd perish from the pleasure, he slipped them inside me. I stilled, getting accustomed to the feel of it as he slowly began moving them.

Unable to handle how good each sensation was, I sat up and pushed against him, his arousal hard and welcome against my backside. He paused his kisses and gently bit my neck.

My breathing quickened. I was chasing a feeling, almost familiar and not quite. It was magnificent. Ecstasy unlike any other. Sensing my growing need, Wrath's fingers moved faster and that ache turned into the most glorious tidal wave of euphoria.

I stopped being self-conscious and shut out thoughts of everything except that incredible feeling. I moved against him, chasing the rapture, realizing Wrath was now letting me take my own pleasure. I was setting the pace and moving as fast or slow as I wished. That I was in command of my own body, my own desires, that no mortal rules would bind me…

… I came undone.

I cried out as pleasure broke through my body, in one marvelous tingling wave after another, then finally slumped against his chest, breathing as if I'd just run for my life.

Once I stopped trembling from the release, Wrath slowly removed his hand from beneath my skirts and righted the top of my gown. A long beat of silence stretched between us as I adjusted the straps with more care and attention than was necessary.

I shifted in his lap, noticing his arousal hadn't abated. My heartbeat sped up. We could complete one of the next steps of accepting our marriage bond in moments.

Right here. In the weapons room. Only his trousers and my gown lay between us. And they could be removed easily enough. Perhaps it was the euphoria still running through my veins, clouding my senses, but it didn't seem like such a terrible idea.

If a ceremony was needed as the final step, we didn't have to perform it. We could indulge in carnal pleasure and remain free from any bond that would tether us for eternity. I shifted in such a way that our bodies intimately rubbed together. The sensation it created, especially after the pleasure he'd just wrought from me, was a new level of rapture.

Wrath didn't move. He was giving me leave to choose.

I grabbed the hem of my skirts and slowly brought them up, over my thighs, my ass. Now all Wrath had to do was release himself from his trousers. I sat back, and the friction of his arousal against my body had me swallowing a moan. His hands tightened on my hips.

A bolt of alarm shot through me, stealing my breath. I no longer knew if sleeping together was a good idea, or if my judgment was impaired from what we'd just done. It was probably nerves. I steeled myself, refusing to succumb to second-guessing anything.

"Our training for this evening is done."

In one swift motion Wrath stood, bringing us both to our feet. I spun around, staring at him. He was wholly unreadable. "*Training?* That's how you'd describe what just happened?"

"You asked for seduction. I obliged." He bent at the waist, offering a polite bow. "Now that you know what you enjoy, you may find the same pleasure at your own hand. Good night."

TWENTY-FOUR

"He said *what*?" Fauna's eyes were as big as saucers. She looped her arm through mine and escorted us out onto a covered pathway. "Maybe you misheard him. Or misinterpreted his meaning. That's possible. Isn't it?"

"Of all the things he could have said after that moment." I exhaled, my breath clouding in the frosty morning air. I was too annoyed to be embarrassed. After the incident in the weapons room, I hadn't seen Wrath for the rest of the night. "I well and truly loathe that demon."

My friend snorted but held her tongue. We strolled across one of the long stretches of covered parapets that surrounded the castle. Guards nodded from their stations on the wall as we passed. Once we were far enough away, Fauna leaned in. "Perhaps he only said it because he'll be envisioning you doing that from now on."

"Doubtful. He couldn't remove himself from the room fast enough."

"I bet all of House Greed that he took himself in hand last night and thought of you while he spilled his seed."

Even with my newfound confidence in owning my desires and feeling no shame, my face heated from the openness with which Fauna discussed such private matters.

She'd called on me first thing in the morning and managed to wrangle what had been troubling me before I'd donned my velvet cloak. Fauna hadn't blushed or batted an eye at the topic, one that

would have caused shock and scandal back home. She'd simply asked if I'd returned the favor with either my hand or my mouth, then giggled wildly when I'd asked for clarification on the latter.

"Maybe he didn't want to take you in the weapons room where anyone could walk in. You are to be his wife. It's not out of the question that he'd protect you from prying eyes."

"Please." I nearly snorted. "Half this realm is content to fornicate in public. I doubt he'd let someone walking in on us deter him."

He certainly hadn't minded an audience when we'd ended up in the corridor outside our rooms. I gritted my teeth at the memory. Facing him after that encounter hadn't been awkward. The same could not be said for when I saw him next. I had no idea how to act.

"Actually, public rendezvous are not as common outside of House Lust and House Gluttony. Sure, other princes show off debauchery on occasion, like Greed and his gaming hell, but not to the extent as those particular Houses. His highness may want you to be certain you're choosing him with a clear head. Perhaps he wasn't sure that's what *you* wanted and he left before he did something he thought you'd regret."

Frustration built in my chest. "Lifting my skirts was a clear indication of my wants. If he wishes to secure the marriage bond, he's not convincing me that's something *he* wants."

"From what you described, my lady, it sounds like physical attraction is not the issue."

I halted in my tracks. I had no idea why this was this getting under my skin. Regardless of what transpired the night before, *I* still did not want to secure our bond. The thought that he felt the same shouldn't consume my thoughts. Especially when I had a hundred other things to be concerned with. Like the fast-approaching Feast of the Wolf.

I shook off the annoyance and proceeded toward the tower with my friend. "Enough talk of princes for now. I don't want the matron to overhear us and report back to Wrath."

Fauna laughed. "That, I can promise, will likely never happen."

"I take it their animosity isn't new."

"Not at all." Fauna pulled us to a stop, then glanced around. "Rumor claims it's centuries old. Some say her daughter was cursed and the prince did nothing to save her."

"Is her daughter in the castle?"

"That's just it… no one knows. There is speculation that his highness banished her from this circle. For a time, at least. It's possible the matron retrieved her and has her hidden somewhere."

For some reason goose bumps rose along my skin. I thought of the wailing that floated up from below the statue of the woman and the

serpent. I couldn't imagine Wrath punishing someone by sending them deep underground. Perhaps that was because *he* hadn't done it.

Even though I hardly knew her, I didn't doubt the matron could have done something like that. Especially if it wasn't to punish, but to protect.

Maybe the wailing, miserable creature I'd heard was her missing daughter. And if the matron brought her daughter back and kept her locked away, I was even more curious to know why. Wrath knew everything that went on in his circle, and I doubted the matron would keep this secret from him for long. Which indicated she was hiding her daughter from another prince.

A new suspicion entered my thoughts. This story was similar to another I'd heard. One that involved La Prima Strega and her daughter. The First Witch was rumored to have cursed the devil because her daughter fell in love with him and they refused to give each other up.

Was the Matron of Curses and Poisons actually the First Witch?

If she was and she'd cursed the devil, I wanted to know why she was currently in Wrath's castle, claiming to be someone else. He must know her true identity. Which meant he also knew what she'd done to his brother, and would explain their hatred and history. So why, then, would he be willing to keep her secret, unless she knew one of his? And if that was the case, it had to be a secret so wicked he'd be willing to strike a bargain with a sworn enemy.

Given what he'd done to save me, that didn't seem so unbelievable.

"Daughter of the Moon. Lady Fauna." Celestia opened her door before I finished knocking. I hid my smile. Wrath would be furious she'd answered so quickly. "How may I be of service to you?"

"I have a few questions. About curses."

Her delight appeared genuine. "By all means. You've come to the right place. Come in."

I walked into the tower chamber and was immediately hit with the pleasing aroma of herbs and oils. I swallowed the pang of homesickness, the sudden reminder of Nonna Maria making spell candles in our small family kitchen. *My family was safe.* And I would finish what I set out to do and get back to make more happy memories with them. Soon.

I wrenched myself into the present. Celestia moved across the

chamber and pulled books and pots off of stools, making room for us to sit around her prep table. While she did that, my attention shifted to items I'd missed during my first visit.

The matron had even more strange and curious things in her collection. From corked jars filled with blinking eyes, to baskets of bird beaks, one overflowing with claws, and another bin stuffed with feathers. Pots of salves and ointments and lotions of all kinds.

A bird skull with runes carved into it was placed on top of a pile of leather-bound books.

She noticed what caught my attention and nodded to it. "Ravens symbolize many things. Death, healing, fertility. Wisdom."

"And the runes?" I drifted closer but did not touch the carvings or the remains. If she was the First Witch, she might have enchanted the skulls and sent them to me. I was unsure if she was trying to help, or if my theory was wildly wrong. She might be exactly who she claimed, and I was forcing together puzzle pieces that didn't fit. "Do they animate the skull?"

"No." Celestia eyed me with what appeared to be suspicion. If she *was* the First Witch, she was directly birthed from a goddess. I wasn't sure if she could sense emotions like Wrath could, but I did my best to keep calm. "They come to me when I meditate over the skull. I etch what the raven wishes me to see. Arcane symbols can be a powerful ally to those with magic in their blood."

Fauna shifted uncomfortably, her attention riveted to the jars tapping with unseen forces on the far side of the chamber. I glanced back to the matron and lowered my voice. "Can they be used to enhance Source?"

"For witches, yes. For those who *are* Source, no. Arcane symbols originate from their essence."

"Those who… you mean the goddesses."

Celestia nodded, her gaze sharp as she studied my face.

According to Nonna's legends, the goddesses were the original source of our power, diluted over time through the First Witch's descendants.

I looked the silver-and-lavender-haired woman over carefully. Her face was lightly lined, but there was no clear indication of her age. Fauna had mentioned that her animosity with Wrath was centuries old, which meant she was likely immortal. The shade of purple in her hair also did not escape my notice. It was the same color of my tattoo with Wrath, and also when I saw *luccicare*, the faint aura surrounding humans.

I couldn't tell if it was excitement or fear pumping through my veins.

"So if a witch uses arcane symbols with their spells, it increases

the potency of that spell."

"Correct."

I slid my focus to Fauna, who was squinting into a cauldron now. "Is it possible for anyone to enchant a skull and send a message? Perhaps a prince of Hell, or a witch."

"All is possible; whether it's probable is another story. Those with knowledge of arcane symbols might be able to do such a thing." Celestia motioned for me to sit. "Were there any symbols carved onto the bone?" I shook my head. "Then I doubt a demon prince or witch was responsible. It was likely someone much closer to Source."

Someone like the First Witch. I kept my breathing even, unwilling to alert anyone to my heightened emotions. If Celestia was the First Witch and her daughter was cursed, that meant the devil's first wife wasn't dead after all. And if she truly lived, then I was definitely right about the witches on my island being murdered for a different reason.

One that had nothing to do with the devil seeking a bride.

And everything to do with revenge.

"Lady Emilia?" Fauna broke into my spiraling thoughts. "Shall we go back to the main palace?"

"Yes." I stood, then spun around to face the matron. "One last question. The Curse Tree. I've been told it grants more than wishes, that it offers knowledge. How would one go about obtaining information instead of a wish or a hex?"

Fauna's attention shot to me like an arrow, but I ignored it. Celestia narrowed her eyes.

"Carve the true name of the one you seek information about into the trunk. Then take one leaf from the tree. Careful when you do—the leaves are as fragile as glass. When you desire the truth, break the leaf in the presence of the one whose name you carved."

I thought about the First Witch, of legends and fables we'd been told. None had ever used her name. "What if I'm unsure of the person's true name? Will their title work?"

"Names *have* power. Titles are a *show* of power. One can be taken or given on a whim, the other cannot." Celestia smiled in a way that set my nerves on edge. "Was there anything else, *my lady*?"

The way she said "my lady" drove home her point. It was a courtesy title, something given that held little meaning outside of this realm. My name was different. Aside from my first name, I would only be a princess or lady here. On my island I would forever remain Emilia Maria di Carlo unless I married. And only my surname would change, never my first.

"No, thank you. You've been most… informative."

TWENTY-FIVE

I gently placed another book on the floor. Haven, the heavenly counterpart to Wrath's personal Hell below, appeared as if a storm had raged through its rainbow-colored shelves. I snagged another ancient tome and flipped through it, mindful of the delicate pages.

The books in this library were all written in Latin, so I understood most of what was in them. Not that it helped my situation.

"Blood and bones."

Another grimoire, another disappointment. There were no records of the First Witch, though that could have been due to the fact I didn't know her true name. In Palermo, Wrath had said something along the lines of "the First Witch, as you call her," which meant that was not the name the demon princes knew her by. If I couldn't find something soon, I'd have to ask him. Which I'd prefer to avoid for several reasons. The first being if he knew La Prima was here and was harboring her, I wasn't sure if he would thwart my efforts at uncovering that mystery.

I'd searched for records of Celestia, but there was no mention of the Matron of Curses and Poisons, either. If she was a royal healer as well as a poisoner, I would have thought there would be court records of her. Either mentions of her saving lives or taking them.

There was nothing.

It was as if she did not exist outside of that tower chamber. Further proof she might not be who she claimed.

I dropped to the ground, my skirts pooling around me. I was in a

lovely navy and gold gown today with flowers embroidered across my bodice, elegant enough for a lady of the Royal Demon Court, and comfortable enough to spend hours on my knees in a darkened corner of the library, searching for answers.

I flipped through a rather thin journal filled with notes and sketches. It spoke of demons that had been made through unnatural sources. Not quite lesser demons, but close. These creatures ranged from human-passing in appearance to a mix between the natural world and mortals. I paused on one illustration. It was humanoid in shape, but its skin was tree bark, its beard moss, and its fingers and limbs were branches of varying lengths and widths.

The next image was of a young man with an enormous set of elk antlers. Another showed a woman with pointed ears and ram horns that curled down to her shoulders.

Notes spoke of spells and hexes that went wrong, turning mortals into nightmares. Shunned and cursed from their world, they ended up here, where they could roam the underworld without fear of persecution.

According to the book, most had scattered across the realm, ending up in the Undying Lands to the northwest, and an eastern mountain range called Merciless Reach.

One note caught my attention.

Creatures made through primordial fear often crave blood. They seek life and there is no greater symbol of life than the heart.

"Lovely." They were this realm's version of a vampire.

I set that illustrated journal aside and scanned the next grimoire, one ear turned toward the entrance. There were just pages of notes on spells, charms, and hexes. I dropped the book onto the towering pile beside me. Then I pulled up my knees and leaned against the shelves.

No matter how hard I tried to stop imagining creatures feasting on hearts, I couldn't shove my sister's mutilated body from my mind.

One night in Palermo Wrath had said that Pride's wife had had her heart torn from her, too. He'd also mentioned that the First Witch had used the darkest of magic to remove her daughter's power and it had unforeseen consequences.

What if her missing heart wasn't part of the murder ritual? What if it was one of the consequences brought about by La Prima? It might have also been a way to set her free from any mortal constraints. I vaguely recalled Nonna saying something like that in passing.

If La Prima's daughter was cursed and not dead, *she* might be the

monster who ran around ripping out witch hearts and devouring them.

Perhaps she was motivated by revenge against her mother, at whatever humanity might have been stolen when her powers were wrenched from her. If the devil was her eternal love, maybe she was driven mad and killed any potential brides who would take her place.

Or maybe it was as simple as the illustrated journal claimed—if she was no longer in possession of her humanity, maybe she craved hearts for everything she no longer had.

"Perhaps there are too many maybes and not enough definitive answers."

I stood and pulled my shoulders back. Now that I was alone, I would go back to the matron and directly confront her about my suspicions. If she *was* the First Witch, I didn't think she'd harm me. There was a reason she'd been sending the enchanted skulls, and it wasn't to frighten. Maybe she could tell me more about the Triple Moon Mirror and offer any ideas on where I might find it, or the Temptation Key.

I brushed my hand against the hidden sheath at my thigh. And if she *did* try to hurt me, I would not go without a fight.

Anticipation had me standing outside the matron's tower chamber in what felt like mere moments. Disappointment had my jaw clenching as I tore off the note tacked to the door and read the hastily scratched message.

Gone for a spell.

It was impossible to determine if she meant it literally or figuratively. The matron would either return in a few minutes, or she'd gone in search of a spell. There was no telling how long the latter might take, but, on the off chance she'd be back soon, I milled around outside her tower until snow began falling and chased me away.

I'd taken all of two steps into the corridor of my bedroom suite when a prickle of awareness slid over my skin. Wrath leaned against the door to my chambers, his attention fixed on my face. I swallowed the surge of… whatever that feeling was and arched a brow the way he'd done countless times before. I still hadn't seen or spoken to him after our last *training* session. And this visit was most unwelcome.

I paused a decent distance away. "May I help you?"

"I was here to ask the same."

He didn't elaborate, and I was not in the mood to play the game of *ask Wrath a thousand questions and receive frustrating answers*. I moved toward my door, expecting him to step aside, and inhaled deeply when he didn't budge. I crossed my arms and waited.

Sensing my resolve, or attempting to re-strategize his battle plan, Wrath changed tactics. "The library is in shambles."

"That's a bit dramatic. There are a few piles of books scattered in one section. I will clean everything up this evening."

"You're looking for information on the First Witch."

"I'm interested in my history. She is part of that."

His expression darkened. It was not quite thunderous, but certainly stormy. "Lie."

"What I may be searching for is none of your concern."

"Everything in this castle is my concern. You, especially."

"I do not press or pry into your plans. I expect the same courtesy."

"Even if I've come to offer assistance?"

"After our last 'lesson,' I was under the impression you wished for me to take matters into my own hands from now on. Quite literally."

Wrath's attention drifted along my silhouette. He looked as if he were mentally replaying our weapons room tryst, dragging my gown up my thighs, touching and caressing me as if my pleasure was his own. When he brought his gaze back to mine, there was no heat or hint of the emotion that had just claimed him. He was remote, unfeeling. A wall was slowly being built between us. I couldn't tell if it was relief gnawing at the pit of my stomach, or something else.

"We leave for Gluttony's royal House in three nights. Send word to me if you'd like to train before then."

He turned to leave and, devil curse me, I called out, "Fine. Meet me in the weapons room at midnight. We'll have one final lesson before the real games begin."

I arrived in the weapons room nearly a half an hour ahead of schedule. I wanted to set the tone of our lesson and with each strike of the ticking clock, my pulse raced faster. I glanced at my reflection in a particularly shiny shield hung on the wall, relieved that I still looked impeccable on the outside, no matter the chaotic state of my insides.

I shook my jitters out and moved to the center of the room.

At precisely midnight, Wrath stepped into the chamber and halted near the door. It closed with a snick that reminded me of a blade sliding free of its sheath. A fitting sound, given the battle that was

about to be launched between us.

Wrath took in my gown—a black off-the-shoulder bodice covered in pale beaded flowers and vines with frothy dark champagne skirts that split on one side a little past my knee.

His focus paused on my footwear. I'd had the shoes specially designed for this dress and was fairly confident the demon prince liked them almost as much as I did.

They were heeled shoes that had a glittering black snake that wound from my ankle to my thigh. The serpent's tongue flicked out but was semi-covered by my dress.

If Wrath wanted a full visual, he would need to push my skirts out of the way. The shoes were inspired in part by the statue in the gardens.

"Tonight we'll—"

"—we'll work on pride." I smiled, noting that my deep berry lip stain captured his attention. I slowly spun in place. "I had this designed for our lesson and I'm quite happy with the results. It's the first time I've created something entirely from my imagination."

"It's beautiful."

"I know." I winked and Wrath actually chuckled. "It's perfection."

"I see your pride is already primed and ready for the lesson." His eyes flashed with something dark and dangerous. "So let's begin."

"Do your worst, your highness. I'm ready."

This time the magic was like a tiny bead rolling between my shoulders, slipping down my spine, pleasant and enticing. I almost arched into it, remembering at the last moment to shove it away, to focus on creating a barrier between the demonic influence and me.

I inhaled deeply, my chest swelling with elation. I was resisting Wrath's influence, and I was hardly breaking a sweat. Battling away pride was by far the easiest thing I'd done yet.

I gave him a cocky grin from where he stood half in the shadows. He hadn't taken another step into the room; he remained by the door, looking ready to bolt. It was about time he felt unsteady. Whenever he was near lately I felt as if my world had tilted wildly off its axis.

"You'll have to try harder. I've gotten quite good at resisting you."

"Have you?" Amusement glinted in his eyes. "Sounds as if you're a little prideful."

I lifted a shoulder and dropped it casually. "Not prideful. Only honest. You've been a decent enough teacher, but this student has surpassed the lessons. I accept my desires. I welcome any challenge. I have little fear of losing. I think your brothers ought to be worried."

"Oh?"

"Of course. There is nothing more dangerous than a woman who owns who she is and apologizes to no one." I gave him a slow once-

over. “I believe I am powerful, therefore I am. Isn’t that the principle you live by? Well, I *know* I’m powerful. I know power comes from many sources and I now have many weapons in my arsenal, your highness. In fact, I can own *you* right now if I chose to. And you would be powerless for a change.”

“Cocksure. Boastful. An inflated sense of self-image.” Wrath checked each one off on his fingers. “You’re right. It doesn’t sound as if you’re under any prideful influence at all.”

“You know what else I believe? I believe you’d secretly *like* me to own you. At least in certain… areas.”

I moved with deliberate, even strides across the room, allowing my hips to sway. My skirt fluttered to the sides, showing off the snake winding up my leg.

If Wrath wanted a lesson, I’d give him one he’d not soon forget.

I backed him against the wall, my lips curving upward as I dragged a finger across his chest, then followed the line of buttons down to his trousers. Twisted demon. He was already aroused. I flicked my gaze up to his, watching intently as I slid my palm over the bulge. Air hissed through his teeth. I followed the hard outline over his pants and his breathing quickened.

The demonic magic he’d been wielding snapped and fell away. Just as I suspected it would. Wrath’s personal set of morals had revealed themselves during each of our lessons, and I’d been watching carefully, learning anything I could even when I’d been unable to block his influence. He *never* used magic when things turned romantic.

“Emilia.”

It was more plea than warning. Now that his influence was gone, our lesson was only just beginning. I leaned into him, pressing my chest against his, enjoying the way his focus shifted to my décolletage. I knew precisely how tight my corset was and how our new position showed off my assets best from his vantage point. He seemed torn between looking his fill and maintaining gentlemanly manners. Which wouldn’t do. I wanted him completely undone.

Suddenly, an image so vivid and real slipped into my senses, confusing reality with illusion. For a startling moment, I was in two places at once.

There was a low hum of music filtering in, strings and pianos, the sound dulled and haunting through the walls. We’d snuck off together, far from the boisterous sounds of a party taking place down the corridor. Shadows hid him from view, but he found me quickly enough. His hand cupped my breast over my bodice, his kisses plundering and possessive. My passion burned as intensely as his. I nipped at his lip, daring him to do the same. He did one better. He tugged the top of my gown down, replacing his daring hand with his mouth.

I slipped inside his trousers, finding him hard and wanting, then smiled as he cursed at the first stroke I made. I brought my mouth to his ear. "Shhh. They'll hear us."

I took him in hand as if it had been something I'd done hundreds of times. I knew exactly what he liked and how to elicit the most pleasure. His body, his heart; I knew them as well as my own. I used that knowledge to my advantage now.

He did not seem to mind.

Several moments later, he shuddered against me, his breathing ragged and hard. Once his trembling ceased, I rolled up onto my toes and kissed him, long and deep. "Meet me in the garden at the witching hour tonight. You know where."

He'd barely managed to refasten his trousers when I ran off, glancing over my shoulder one last time before I slipped from the darkened room.

Wrath called my name, drawing me back into the present. I'd never had a vision like that and had no idea what to make of it. Something about it didn't feel like the realm's magic.

It felt like a memory.

Wrath traced the curve of my cheek, his voice quiet. "Emilia—"

"I…"

I stepped away from him, giving us both much-needed distance and considered my next words with care. I felt as if I were losing my grip on reality. Concern slipped into his features, so I did my best to pull in that prideful feeling again. To wield it to my advantage.

I purposely dropped my focus to his trousers; there was no longer any sign of attraction or lust. Apparently, my distraction hadn't gone unnoticed.

I offered him a cutting smile. "It seems our lesson is over."

Before my mask slipped, I spun on my heel and headed out the door. Something strange was occurring. And it seemed to happen whenever Wrath and I were in passionate situations.

If they were memories and not illusions created from this realm… then I might have discovered another one of Wrath's secrets. Except I had no idea how any of it could be possible.

But I was damn well going to find out.

TWENTY-SIX

Snowflakes danced wickedly outside my window.

Frost crept up the panes like wintery vines. I sat on the wide sill, staring out at a world blanketed in a fresh layer of snow. Night was quickly falling, tinging everything deep shades of blue. Two days had come and gone since I last saw the prince of this circle. I'd been avoiding him after the vision, still unsure if it was memory or fantasy. It had to be something the realm conjured, but it *felt* so real it was difficult to shake off.

The Matron of Curses and Poisons hadn't yet returned, and I did not want to confide in anyone what I'd seen or experienced. I'd been hoping she could create a tonic or might know of any magic that would unlock the truth hidden inside me.

If it *had* been a memory, then I'd been to this realm before. And Wrath and I… I couldn't fathom how he'd pretended to not know me back in Palermo. There were times there, though, I wondered how he knew details I hadn't shared. Like where I lived. My name. I'd comforted myself by thinking it had something to do with what I'd thought was his rebirth spell—that night I'd been attacked by the Viperidae, we'd been inside each other's minds for brief seconds.

Was that what was happening now? It was possible I was seeing into *his* memories, witnessing him with someone else. Maybe I was experiencing the world through *her* eyes, reliving *her* memories. I knew demons could possess people, but I'd never heard of a witch doing the same. At this point, nothing would surprise me.

I'd spent the better part of the last two days trying to decipher all possible meanings. No theory was too silly. I wrote everything down. From thinking Wrath might be Pride, to considering if *I* was the First Witch, cursed to forget as punishment for what I'd done.

After a while, details started to blur, confusing me more. I couldn't recall if I'd seen Wrath's face, or if it was just an impression I'd had of him.

I remembered the room being dark in the vision, the sounds of a distant party, but couldn't remember the sound of my lover's voice. If he'd sworn loudly when he found his release, or if it had been a murmur. And if it wasn't Wrath with me in the vision…

I exhaled, my breath creating clouds on the windowpane. That complicated matters even more. When I arrived at the feast tonight, I might recognize the lover from that memory. If we danced together, would that unlock other memories that had been secreted away?

I slipped from the window's edge and leafed through the notes I'd made from the enchanted skulls. *Past, present, future, find.* I'd thought it was referencing the Triple Moon Mirror Envy was after. Now I wondered if it encompassed more than that.

Were those visions part of my past, or my future? If they were images of the future, perhaps it related to the prophecy. The part where I could set right a terrible wrong.

When I'd been under Lust's influence, I'd had that impression of choice, balance. That I could damn everyone, or make something right. But *what*?

I kept circling back to the devil's slain bride. Could falling in love be the key to breaking the curse? On the surface it seemed simple. But it wasn't. I'd need to fall madly in love with Pride. And to accomplish that, I'd have to end my betrothal to Wrath for good.

"Goddess help me, this is a disaster."

Pride would be at the feast. If he'd been the mysterious lover in my vision, and if it was part of the past and not the future, it was entirely possible neither one of us would be able to deny the sizzling connection in person. Which frightened me.

If it *was* the past I saw… then that would mean I was already Pride's wife. Maybe to break the curse I had to fall in love with him all over again, without any memories of us.

A theory so outlandish, it just might be true. Which could be the real reason Pride hadn't invited me to his circle. Maybe it went deeper than my accidental betrothal to Wrath.

Without knowing what I'd done, maybe I'd broken Pride's heart and damned them all by choosing the wrong brother. It would also explain Wrath's hatred when I first summoned him and he demanded I reverse the spell before it was too late.

A knock on my outer door drew me from my reverie. “Come in.”

Harlow bobbed a quick curtsy, then held a dress bag aloft. “The cobbler will have your shoes ready shortly. Did you want me to lay out the gown for you?”

“Please.”

Through all of my worries, I’d completely lost track of time. We’d be traveling to House Gluttony within the hour. This evening marked the first of three nights dedicated to the Feast of the Wolf, an event I’d rather avoid if not for the potential information I could gather. Thinking about having my greatest fear ripped from me caused my heart rate to triple, though.

At first I’d been worried my greatest fear was my secret mission of vengeance being revealed. Now it could be my fear about the creature wailing below the statue, my family dying at the hands of our enemies, my magic never returning, or the possibility that my memories had been stolen and the life I’d been living was all a lie.

The biggest fear of all kept circling like a portent of death and doom.

I couldn’t stop thinking that *I* was the devil’s bride and I hadn’t been murdered—I’d been cursed to forget. My palms dampened. There was no possible way that was true.

Still, the thought haunted me the entire time I prepared for tonight’s opening event. True or not, if I couldn’t shove the fear aside; it would be revealed to each of my enemies and their subjects. Not only would it be humiliating, it would indicate I had not left the past behind when I’d sold my soul and was actively working to destroy one of them.

If the demon princes were suspicious of my motivations for coming here before, they’d have those thoughts confirmed. And I didn’t want to know what they’d do for retribution.

I descended the stairs, shoulders back, head held high. I’d been expecting to see Fauna and Anir. Instead the Prince of Wrath waited, dressed to devastate, his attention riveted to mine. I hadn’t chosen to wear one of his signature House colors. Not that he seemed put off by the crushed red velvet gown, or the way it clung to my curves before pooling around my feet.

In fact, I almost missed a step when I noticed the color of his shirt. A deep, enticing cranberry peeked out from the layers of black waistcoat and swallowtail suit jacket. Either Harlow or the seamstress

must have given him information on my attire.

I reached the bottom step and slowly pivoted in place. My shoes were the same snake design from a few nights before, but these were deep gold instead of black. It was the one tribute I made to my current House of Sin. Regardless of if any of my theories were correct, in this reality, in this version of myself, this was where I felt comfortable. There was no use denying that I aligned with the sin of wrath more than any other.

"Well?" I prompted. "How do I look?"

Wrath's gaze darkened into a shadow of sinful promise. "I suspect you know."

"Indulge me, then."

"Trouble incarnate."

"Mighty praise coming from one of the Wicked." I glanced around the empty foyer. Silence stretched between us, which didn't help to soothe my growing nerves. The more I tried not to focus on my theories, the more they haunted me. "Where are Fauna and Anir?"

"By now they're nearly at Gluttony's already."

"Who else will be joining us?"

"No one." He held out his arm for me. I wondered if he knew he also looked like trouble. And temptation. But if Pride was the man from my vision, Wrath might also look like a fond memory before the night was through. Something pinched in my center at the thought. "Tonight we'll use my carriage. It's considered rude to arrive at the Feast by *transvenio* magic."

I accepted his arm and we made our way out of the looming set of double doors.

Outside, our conveyance sat waiting, bits of snow sticking to the roof like powdered sugar. Wrath's carriage was darker than the night with flecks of gold in the lacquered finish. There was no driver waiting, only horses.

"Will you be driving the carriage?"

"No. My power will guide it."

"*Transvenio* magic is rude, but steering a carriage with magic is not?" I shook my head. "I may live a thousand years and will never understand these ridiculous demon rules."

The four ebony steeds snuffed the air, their red eyes the only mark that they were not quite the same as horses in the mortal world. Wrath set about checking their bridles, tsking a little when one of the hell horses nibbled at him.

I drew in a quick breath. I'd been wrong. Their eyes weren't the only thing that marked them as different. Their gleaming, metal teeth indicated they were more predator than simple equine. The hell horse nipped again, more insistently.

“Gentle, Death.”

“Goddess give me strength.” I eyed the three other beasts. “Famine, Pestilence, and War, I presume.” Wrath’s grin was confirmation enough as he glanced over his shoulder. “I cannot believe you named them after the four horsemen, and yet I’m not terribly surprised.”

He strolled over to where I waited, then handed me up into the carriage. “Perhaps they aren’t merely named after them.”

Wrath settled onto the plush velvet bench seat across from me, his expression smug as I let that information sink in. With a quick rap on the ceiling, we were off.

The wheels clattered across the stone, but the sound and jarring feeling was muffled by the well-stuffed seating and plush, layered carpets. I’d never ridden inside such an opulent conveyance. I’d never ridden in a shabby one, either. Before my ride with the emissary, the closest I’d ever come to traveling via carriage was a horse-drawn buggy.

I drew my brows together. That couldn’t be correct… after disembarking from a ship, we had to travel by carriage to visit Nonna’s friend in northern Italy. Except I couldn’t quite remember how we’d gotten there.

Wrath studied me. “You appear as if you’re in the midst of a vexing riddle.”

I lifted a shoulder. “I suppose it’s mostly nerves.”

“About the fear portion of the festival?”

“The fear, the whole ordeal. Meeting the rest of your brothers. Dancing.”

He was silent for a while. I doubted he’d expected such honesty and was unsure of how to proceed. Finally, he shifted forward. “No harm will befall you. I will not allow it.”

“Perhaps it’s your brothers you should be concerned for.”

“If they are stupid enough to ignite your fury, they deserve to feel the burn.”

I smiled at him. “And yet you still toss matches onto the kerosene all the time.”

“Wrath and fury are my sins of choice. I *like* your temper.”

After an indeterminate amount of time of descending and ascending a few mountain peaks, our carriage abruptly came to a halt. Wrath peered outside, his expression once again carefully set into that cold, unforgiving mask.

“We’re here.” He reached for the handle, then paused. His muscles were tense beneath his well-tailored suit. He shook his head once, then looked at me. “Should you find yourself in need of a partner, I will dance with you.”

Before I could react, he shoved the door open and exited the carriage. His hand appeared from the shadows, waiting for mine. I gave myself a moment to gather my emotions. I hadn't lied to Wrath about the cause of my nerves, but I hadn't expressed *all* of the reasons behind my pounding heart. I would now have an opportunity to speak with every demon prince of Hell. And one of them, quite possibly, had orchestrated my sister's murder.

Much would either be gained or lost over the next few days. And, if my sister's murderer was here, there was no telling if he'd try to rip my heart from my chest, too.

If I was about to enter into a battle for my life, at least I had Wrath at my side.

His fingers tightened on mine as I stepped from the carriage and took in House Gluttony. It was massive, if unusual in design. A cross between open Roman terraces with tall arched windows and medieval towers. It was built into the side of a steep mountaintop and looked like something out of a gothic fairy tale.

"Prepare yourself." Wrath escorted me up a small flight of stairs and stopped just outside the castle's grand entrance. "My brother's debauchery knows no limits."

Words failed me as we walked inside House Gluttony. The prince of this circle did not hide his namesake sin or vices. Immediately upon entering the palatial receiving foyer, we were greeted by the most scandalous scene I'd ever borne witness to.

A table the size of four oversized mattresses was prominently on display, forcing guests to squeeze around it if they were to enter the castle beyond. The table was not covered in food or wine. It was covered in lovers. Some were engaged in acts I'd never dreamed of.

On one end, a woman lay naked, her legs spread wide as a man poured a trail of chocolate sauce over her breasts, down her stomach, and across the apex of her body. He tossed the jug aside, dropped to his knees and began feasting. There was no romance, no seduction. Only pure, animalistic hunger. Not that the woman seemed to mind.

My attention darted to the opposite end of the table, where a young man lay with an arm bent behind his head, watching as his partner sucked whipped cream from his arousal, and another lover entered her from where she was bent over. My face flamed at the erotic scene.

Before I'd learned that Pride wasn't my intended, Wrath had mentioned his brother inviting lovers into our bed. I now understood what he meant. I also knew with vivid clarity what Fauna had been asking when she'd inquired about taking my mouth to Wrath.

"My brother enjoys shocking guests upon their arrival." Wrath's low voice at my ear sent a shiver skittering along my spine. "His

subjects are all too happy to participate in his favorite vices. The lovers here want to be seen. They desire for us to overindulge in their pleasure. Our attention feeds them as their trysts feed us. It will not be this way throughout the entire House."

Wrath's hand on my back did not uproot my feet from where I'd planted them. "Will Gluttony's influence make me do that? In front of everyone?"

Wrath followed my gaze, his own expression inscrutable. "No."

I subtly studied the demon at my side. He was completely unaffected by all of the naked bodies and grunts and groans. He might be gazing upon furniture, noting it was there to sit upon, but worth no more than a cursory glance. The same could not be said for me. I tore my attention from where the man was licking and sucking with fevered abandon.

"How can you be sure? Lust managed to influence me. As did Envy. I'm sure your brother can make me do whatever he pleases with whomever he pleases I do it. Maybe our lessons weren't enough. Maybe—"

"Breathe. No one will touch you while we're here, Emilia. It would be an act of war and we're all gathered with the understanding of temporary peace. You belong to House Wrath. If they forget, I will take pleasure in reminding them."

One look into his harsh features drove his promise home. I had little doubt this prince would tear someone limb from limb if they laid a finger on me without my consent. I wanted that power. I wanted to know safety at my own hand and almost swore I had once upon a time. Perhaps that was why I'd felt so envious when I'd first met Envy and he'd used his influence on me. I longed for the power to defend myself and my loved ones.

My focus drifted back to where the man knelt between the woman's thighs. He worked her now with mouth and hand. A female lover moved to her chest, adding more whipped cream and licking her skin clean before adding another dollop.

Gluttony wished to shock his guests, to unnerve them. Except most were from this realm and had likely witnessed much more debauchery. No, this tableau was not for *all* of his guests. This was for me. To unsettle the mortal guest of honor long before I entered his ballroom.

And he'd almost succeeded.

Nakedness, people seeking sexual pleasure, no matter how much I kept trying to move past it, the mortal way of thinking of them as wrong and shameful kept creeping back in. They kept shocking and embarrassing me because deep down, I still worried about being ruined by human notions of scandal. Most of all, I kept worrying

about what others would think.

Enough. I'd had enough of falling back into old fears. I strode over to the table and dipped my finger into a bowl of whipped cream, then slowly turned to Wrath as I licked it off. There wasn't anything in his expression now that spoke of boredom or disinterest. He tracked each movement as if committing it to memory.

A waiter appeared, holding a tray of champagne flutes.

I gave Wrath a small, devious smile and snagged a glass of sparkling demonberry wine. "Cheers to being scandalized."

Without waiting for his response, I rotated and walked past the table of lovers.

When I entered the Feast of the Wolf and the herald called out my name, I'd convinced myself I was the most fearsome one in the room.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The Prince of Gluttony was not at all what I expected. He wasn't perched on a throne, or giving off the appearance of cool boredom, or exuding royal arrogance. There wasn't anything particularly dangerous looking about him, either. Except for the threat he posed to hearts.

He stood, arms full of buxom ladies, near a fountain of spirits, a secret smile pulling at the corners of a luscious mouth. The prince leaned in to whisper something in each of his companions' ears, their laughter sultry and filled with wicked promises.

I arched a brow as he took turns nibbling at their necks. He was a rake through and through. And he seemed adored for it.

He was not quite as tall as Wrath, but his shoulders were broad, his hips narrow, and the width of his thighs suggested a fit body hidden beneath his blackberry-colored suit.

His slightly ruffled brown hair had strands of gold and red in certain light, though the darkness never relinquished its hold for long. He wore a bronze crown, fitted with multicolored gemstones. Gluttony's hazel eyes were a mixture of brilliant shades of green and gold and brown. All vying for dominance, all indulging in their own beauty.

And they were now trained on where Wrath and I stood. One brow quirked up.

"Brother! Come meet my newest friends, Drusilla and Lucinda. They were just telling me the most interesting story."

“I don’t doubt that.” Wrath’s lack of decorum didn’t seem to surprise anyone but me. He placed a hand at the small of my back. “My wife, Emilia di Carlo.”

Gluttony’s attention shifted to me. His nose looked as if it had been broken once or twice, but that imperfection only succeeded in making him more interesting. His gaze raked over me and a spark of mischief flared. “Soon-to-be wife, from what I understand.”

“Actually,” I cut in, “I haven’t decided to accept the bond.”

“Hear that, brother?” Gluttony stepped away from his companions and tossed an arm around Wrath’s shoulders. “There’s hope for me yet.”

“Breathe in her direction without her expressed permission, and she will disembowel you.” Wrath swiped a glass of demonberry wine from a passing tray and sipped it, the picture of casual elegance. “I’ve already requested that she refrain from violence for our visit, but if I were you, I wouldn’t tempt her fury.”

The brothers exchanged a long look. Wrath had basically come in and set his own rules at his brother’s royal court. Just as he’d done in Envy’s House of Sin. It was a wonder that Gluttony didn’t so much as lift a brow at Wrath’s impertinence. “You’re a violent little vixen, then?”

“I have my moments, your highness.”

His laugh was full and rich.

“Explains how you’ve captured this one’s attention.” He leaned in and spoke in a mock whisper, his tone serious, as if sharing a grave secret. “Wrath has an unquenchable taste for fury. Though he never overindulges in it. Much to everyone’s dismay.” Wrath did not return his brother’s smile, which only succeeded in delighting the prince of this circle more. “Perhaps you will surprise us all, dear brother. This may be the year you let loose after all. Live down to our expectations. Gorge yourself on some fun for once.”

“Be grateful I limit my idea of fun, brother.”

“Well, the hunt begins at dawn, so you can saddle up a hell horse and unleash your warrior spirit then.” He glanced to me, troublesome smirk in place. “You, too, Lady Emilia. Let us see if you’re equally inspired by bloodlust.”

“I don’t ride.”

“No?” His eyes twinkled with amusement. “Then I shall stay and keep you company. While they’re getting into trouble, I’m sure we can find some of our own.”

Whatever levity Gluttony had been feeling was gone in an instant, replaced by an icy glare. I followed the direction of his gaze, surprised to find the object of his loathing was a beautiful, prim noblewoman. Her pale blue hair was coiffed in the style of proper English ladies and

her elegant dress buttoned up to her neck.

She wore kidskin gloves that ended past her elbows and an expression of revulsion as she spied the host, her gaze cutting from across the room. She leaned next to her companion and whispered something that sent the other noblewoman tittering.

"If you'll excuse me." Gluttony's mood darkened further. "There's a party crasher in our midst."

Without uttering another word, Gluttony strode off toward the giggling ladies.

I turned to Wrath. "What was that about?"

"She's a journalist from the Shifting Isles. And she rarely has anything flattering to say about the royals in this realm. She's been particularly vicious with Gluttony."

I thought back to the lovers on the table. "She doesn't enjoy his displays of overindulgence, I take it."

"On the contrary." Wrath's mouth edged up on one side. "She called his last gathering 'perfectly ordinary and utterly contrived. A predictable, uninspired evening.'"

"I cannot believe you memorized that."

"My brother quoted it so often, it stuck. Gluttony was furious. He has since thrown the most lavish, over-the-top, debauched parties he can."

"He wants her to eat her words."

"Amongst other things, no doubt."

I couldn't help but smile. "Hate is a powerful aphrodisiac for some."

"Indeed. It is." Wrath's attention briefly fell to my lips. "Would you like to tour the pleasure gardens or settle into your rooms?"

I recalled what Fauna had said about the twilight gardens and my stomach did a nervous flip. If Wrath and I snuck off now, I would miss the opportunity to meet the rest of his family.

Not to mention, I wasn't sure being alone with him where seduction was being served for public consumption was a wise idea.

As if he'd plucked the thought from my mind, he added quietly, "Pride will make his grand entrance at the masked ball tomorrow. Sloth will slip in right before the fear ceremony. Greed and Envy will arrive fashionably late this evening."

"And Lust?"

"I imagine he's here and is indulging. While he tends to siphon feelings of happiness to enhance his power, he does participate in carnal temptations when they're offered to him. These parties tend to feed his sin on multiple levels."

I glanced toward the veranda, where a set of doors were thrown open and a cold breeze blew snowflakes in from the patio beyond.

Tiny flickering silver orbs floated in the darkness.

Going to my bedchamber was the best decision, yet I found myself saying, “Let’s take a quick stroll through the garden.”

Unsurprisingly, Gluttony’s idea of a pleasure garden was quite literal. We walked past lovers barely hidden in the shadows, the sounds of their bare skin slapping against each other and breathy moans created a strangely haunting symphony. I did my best to keep my attention fixed on the torchlit path in front of us, not daring to seek out writhing shadows near the hedges.

Wrath, as always, seemed unaffected.

“Have you toured the gardens before?” I immediately wished I hadn’t asked.

“Yes.” He gave me a sidelong glance. “I always survey the grounds to ensure there’s no hidden threat.”

Almost on command, a woman screamed her lover’s name.

“Of course.” I rolled my eyes. “It certainly sounds as if there’s *danger* here.”

“Hidden armies, unwelcome guests, clandestine meetings between scheming Houses.” Wrath leaned close and dropped his voice. “A lot can happen in the dark, my lady.”

“He’s not wrong.” The Prince of Lust’s grin bordered on feline as he stepped into our path and stretched his arms above his head, exposing a sliver of golden skin above his trousers. His charcoal eyes drank me in, then spit me out with disinterest. “Hello again, little darling.”

“Lust.” Despite the inner voice urging me to run, I held my ground. All of my senses heightened as I waited for that first lick of his soul-crushing influence. “I would say it’s nice to see you again, but…”

I lifted a shoulder, letting the rest go unsaid.

“I will have to remedy that. Later.” He turned to his brother. There was no anger or glint of retribution in his expression. As far as I was aware, the last time they saw each other, Wrath had stuck a dagger in his chest. “I need a word. Privately.”

Wrath hesitated before nodding once. He turned to me. “I’ll stop by your chamber later. Unless you’d like me to escort you there now.”

“No.” I shook my head, grateful for the excuse to leave Lust and his troublesome influence. “I’m sure I’ll find my own way back.”

Wrath nodded, but didn’t move to follow his brother. I felt his

gaze on me until I turned the corner. Halfway down the next path, a servant appeared. Wrath, no doubt, had managed to arrange our meeting. “Lady Emilia, if you’ll follow me. I can show you to your chambers.”

After settling into my well-appointed room—all cobalt blue, silver, and dripping in an overabundance of luxury—I waited, perched on the edge of my bed, for what felt like hours. Straining to hear Wrath’s light knock at my door.

It never came.

At first I worried Lust had struck him, vengeance for what had occurred between them in Palermo. Then a new worry slipped in. We were staying in a House filled with debauchery. If Wrath hadn’t made it to his bed, I wondered if that meant he’d tumbled into someone else’s.

SilverFrost Garden,
southeast tower, dawn.
Wear something to die for.
And come masked.

I stared down at the note that arrived well past midnight. Cobalt blue paper inked with platinum—the parchment thick and luxurious.

There was no indication who the sender was, what I’d find if I accepted the invitation, or what manner of mischief I might be inviting into my already complicated world. The handwriting didn’t belong to Wrath, who still hadn’t shown up.

Given the rich indulgence of the paper and ink, I imagined it was penned by Gluttony, but there was always a chance one of the other princes in attendance had sent it along.

Wearing something “to die for” might not be a demonic euphemism.

I carefully considered my options. I could ignore it. That was certainly the safest route. After the assassination attempt at House Wrath, it wasn’t a stretch to believe it was a trap.

With everyone meeting at dawn to start the hunt, I'd be alone and vulnerable. Whoever sent it must know I'd chosen not to ride out with the group.

And the only person who knew that—aside from Wrath—was Gluttony.

If my attire mattered, it might indicate a clandestine party. One where masks were required to keep anonymity of the attendees. A mysterious event hosted in the underworld, by an unknown source, was not the typical gathering I'd ever considered.

But now… I exhaled. Now I couldn't decline something that might present an opportunity for me to interrogate a prince of Hell without Wrath chaperoning.

I flipped the card over, end by end, thinking. Just because I'd been asked to meet at the SilverFrost Garden did not mean that's where I had to show up. At least not initially.

A plan slowly came together in my mind. There was an expansive veranda outside the southeast tower ballroom with a grand staircase that led to the gardens. I'd arrive early and wait in one of the darkened corners there. I swung myself out of bed and quickly dressed in a gown made of shadows.

Gluttony strolled onto the empty veranda, a knuckle's worth of liquor poured into a crystal glass. A decanter was tucked beneath his other arm. I would claim it was too early to drink, but he didn't appear to have made it to bed. There was a mussed quality to his hair, a slight wrinkle in his suit. As if his bedmate had kept him occupied all night and well into the morning. He played the role of a debauched rake to perfection.

He took a healthy swig from his glass. All princes seemed to enjoy their alcohol the same, though the quantities in which they indulged differed.

I pressed myself deeper into the shadows and watched his approach through lowered lashes, holding my breath to avoid detection. As if the slightest inhalation would give me away.

"I can't decide if I'm amused or insulted."

My entire body tensed at having been discovered so quickly. I reached for my dagger, relaxing once I felt its familiar weight in my grip. I stepped into the watery predawn light.

There was no use hiding now.

I waited in silence for him to continue. Clearly he desired this

meeting alone. He might as well dazzle me with whatever speech he'd prepared.

He leaned over the stone railing, surveying the decadent garden below. Silver flowers coated in frost glistened like diamonds. "Perhaps your strategy will work famously."

"What strategy?"

"Winning the hunt. In five minutes, the whole of the castle will come charging out of the stables." He set his drink on the wide railing before him, then motioned to the dark roof in the distance. Snow-covered hills rolled into an evergreen forest. "People rarely notice what's in front of them, especially when they expect to find something else."

"I'm not sure I follow your meaning."

He slowly twisted to look at me, his expression a study of false chagrin. "I may have left out a few important details in the note. Like the prize for winning the hunt."

I kept the trepidation off my face. I didn't think it was anything more than typical country sport. "I was unaware that there was a prize."

"Prize. Prey. Some might argue they are one and the same." His grin was carved of wicked intent. "The host chooses the prey each Blood Season. Participants only learn what they're looking for in the stables, right before the hunt begins."

My blood turned cold. "Wrath said there was no sacrifice involved during any portion of the three-day event."

"I never said anything about a sacrifice. I just said someone or some*thing* will be hunted." He studied me closer than I would have thought possible, considering how much he'd had to drink. "No one kills the chosen prey." He winked. "We're not total monsters."

"Why did you want me masked?"

"To see if you'd indulge me." He lifted a shoulder and dropped it. As if that were all the reason anyone needed. I was glad I'd decided against wearing a mask. "Has anyone told you why it's called a Blood Season?"

"No, but I'm sure it will be a delightful story."

"If a lesser demon or noble wins the hunt, they have the option to drink the elixir of life."

"Blood."

My stomach flipped as Gluttony nodded. Nonna used to tell us the Wicked drank blood. Now I knew where that rumor had come from. "What if a royal wins?"

"We have the option to claim our own prize, if at least four of us vote in favor of it. But drinking the elixir of life is not the only reason we call it a Blood Season. The winner of the hunt is decided by

whoever draws first blood. Participants choose how much to spill, and how they spill it. Claws, blades, arrows, teeth." His gaze turned back to the stables. A gunshot rent the air, startling me. "Ah, yes. They've found the ice rifles. If I were you, I'd consider joining the hunt now."

"I told you, I don't ride."

"A shame. This year they're hunting an ice dragon. Majestic, violent creatures." He tore his attention away from the building in the distance and looked at me again. "And as for riding, I'd reconsider. I've found that sometimes our bodies recall what our minds do not."

Gluttony inclined his head, then strode back into his castle, leaving me to contemplate his parting words. A second shot cracked like thunder and the sound of a stampede followed, the ground rumbling beneath my feet. Something stirred in my blood.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I hiked up my skirts and raced toward the stables.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Outside the stables, a pale violet mare toed the snow with spiked metal hoofs before turning quicksilver eyes on me. Intelligence gleamed out from those liquid eyes as I slowly approached the massive hell horse. A silver crescent moon glimmered on its forehead and a handful of stars spread over its rear end like a constellation.

"Aren't you divine, girl?" I stepped close. "I'm not sure what your name is, but I need to call you something. How about Tanzie? Short for Tanzanite."

I smiled as the horse inclined her head in approval.

The moment of tranquility was short-lived. In the distance, shouts rang out, followed by an earthshaking roar. I imagined it belonged to the ice dragon Gluttony mentioned.

The hunt was clearly in full swing, but I was less concerned with it than I was with the growing need to ride as hard as I could over the frosted grounds.

My heart pounded like a war drum. Riding fast across this terrain would be dangerous, if it weren't for the claw-tipped horseshoes. I petted Tanzie's flank with confidence, somehow knowing she would tolerate nothing less from the person she allowed the honor of taking her saddle. And what a beautiful saddle it was—dark and oiled so it appeared like frozen ink.

A small pouch hung on its side. Gluttony must have had it readied.

Placing one foot in the stirrup, I swung myself up and over,

grateful I'd decided to wear thick stockings under my dress. Choosing to sit astride was hardly an appropriate position, but I doubted anyone in the underworld viewed it the same way as mortals.

My thighs tightened around the horse as I readied myself. I clucked my tongue and lifted the reins. I didn't have to urge the great beast further. Tanzie trotted away from the stable and made her way down a sloping hill, gaining speed on the decline instead of slowing.

Judging from the muffled sounds of hooves beating snow, the hunting party was behind us, either in the forest or just at its edge. There were no rules that stated I had to participate in the hunt, but I didn't want to get caught out here and be encouraged to join them.

My breath clouded in front of me as I leaned forward in my seat, heart thumping in time with each beat of the steed's hooves. We careened around Gluttony's castle, the gentle slope turning into a sharp drop-off. My unbound hair flew back as the biting winds stole nips of my flesh. Tears stung my eyes, but I couldn't blink, couldn't help myself as I stood higher in the saddle while the horse plunged down the mountain. A memory was stirring… I felt as if I'd been here before, racing the wind and riding like a warrior into battle.

I forgot about the hunt, the Feast of the Wolf, and all of the demons riding close by. I had no idea where I was going, but something called to me, deep in my blood. It screamed at me to remember, to let go of thoughts and simply *feel*.

Tanzie neighed as if confirming those feelings. As if she'd wanted me to recall this was what we'd been created for. This feeling of ultimate freedom and shucking restraints away. All that mattered was the ground we hurtled over and the blood pumping in our veins.

As we crested a massive hill, a field of black rose like an ink stain across the snow. I drew us to a slow trot and led Tanzie closer to the shimmering hill. Up close, I saw that the dark mass wasn't solid. It was millions of tiny black flowers growing through the ice. I brought Tanzie to a stop and jumped down. The ebony petals had silver dots on them.

Intrigued, I plucked one, surprised when the whole root slipped out easily. The odd silver roots glimmered brightly, then dried up before my eyes. Magic or some peculiar hell plant. I wanted to study them later and see what else they could do. I grabbed a handful of flowers and tucked them into a small leather pouch fastened on the saddle.

Tanzie neighed, stomping imperiously, signaling her boredom with our diversion of flower picking. Without looking back at the undulating field, I hopped back onto the horse, and we rode even harder than before. I was so caught up in the sensory aspect of the ride, of the exaltation of the icy air nipping at my skin and stealing my

breath, that I didn't notice the castle towering before us. Nor was I aware that we'd crossed some invisible boundary line.

It was only when the first round of guards circled us, swords aimed and ready, shouting for me to halt, that I realized my error. I'd invaded another demon prince's domain without invitation. Tanzie reared back, then dropped to the ground, stamping her feet as one guard silenced the others and called out a clear command to me.

"Dismount and drop to your knees."

"There seems to be a misunderstanding." I held tight to the reins. "I was riding at House Gluttony and didn't realize I'd come so far."

"I said, dismount and drop to your knees."

The guard who'd spoken stepped from the formation. His open-faced iron helmet had deadly-looking wings on either side. Across the top band, where the helmet molded over his forehead, a set of gold claw marks were etched onto the metal.

I noted none of the other guards shared that design, making him the obvious leader of their group. Another line of guards appeared from the castle, arrows nocked in their bows.

I paid them little mind, focusing instead on the biggest threat.

My gaze slid over the lead guard's features, committing them to memory should things go wrong and I needed to recall details upon my escape. Burnished gold hair peeked out from the upper portion of his helmet. His sun-kissed skin was free from all but one imperfection: a pale silver scar that diagonally cut across a pair of arrogant lips.

I couldn't make out the color of his eyes from where I sat, but the hardness in them would never be forgotten. Tanzie snuffed the air, dancing back as the other guards took another step forward, closing their ranks. If I dismounted now, I would certainly regret it.

I sat taller, donning my most commanding tone. "I demand to speak with the prince of this House. There has been a mistake."

"Dismount before my sword finds its way into your gut."

"Touch me, and I promise you will feel more than my wrath." The smile that tugged at my lips was as vicious as his weapon. "It might be worth the pain just to watch the Prince of Wrath carve you apart. I doubt he'll go easy on anyone who harms his princess."

Surprise flickered in his gaze before he schooled his features.

"Forgive me, but I do not recall receiving word that you were invited onto our lands." He stepped closer, lining his blade up with my heart. "Which grants me permission to remove the threat to our territory as I see fit. Now get off the fucking horse, *princess*."

If I were to focus on the positive in a very bad situation, I was not chained and escorted into a cell. I was brought to a lavish parlor and promptly locked inside with a handful of armed guards stationed at the doors and windows. I ignored their icy stares and scanned the room.

White marble floors and walls shined cheerfully in the flickering candlelight. Silk furniture—gilded and ornate enough to rival the Sun King's famed palace in France—surrounded me. I sat on the edge of a pearl-colored brocade settee, fingers itching to clasp my hidden dagger. No one spoke. There were no royal crests on their uniforms, nothing to indicate which royal House of Sin I'd accidentally invaded.

Not that I could identify anything other than Greed's crowned frog insignia if I did spy a crest. I knew with certainty I wasn't in House Wrath, Envy, or Gluttony. As far as I could recall, almost all of the seven demon princes should be at the Feast of the Wolf by now. Which was the likely complication behind the guards not knowing the proper protocol for dealing with a trespasser. One bright note in this dismal situation was I'd found the perfect hiding place to avoid the hunt.

An imperial rococo clock above the mantel ticked the seconds away. The lead guard had dropped me off here and left, murmuring orders to the two guards standing on either side of the door. Their attention had slid to me before they jerked their chins in acknowledgment of whatever he'd said. A quarter of an hour passed. Surely, as the guest of honor, someone from House Gluttony would notice my absence. Wrath most assuredly would come looking.

A full hour crawled by. No one came. Another hour passed in what had to be the slowest shift of time in history. Still, no prince arrived, dagger in hand, to free me.

It was time to become my own hero and save myself.

I cleared my throat. "Which royal House is this?"

Silence.

No one shifted, or even blinked. It was as if I hadn't spoken at all. I settled back onto my seat, getting comfortable. Another hour slipped by and just when I was about to go mad, the door cracked open. One of the guards blocked my view, and the voices were too quiet to make out any part of the conversation. The guard nodded, then closed the door.

He pivoted in my direction, his expression cold. "Get up."

My knees locked. "Where are we going?"

"His highness is releasing you."

"I don't understand… doesn't he wish to speak with me?"

The guard's face split into a cruel grin. "Best to not inquire about his wishes. I suspect they would give you nightmares."

The ride back to House Gluttony was cold and miserable.

I couldn't shake the sense of foreboding that trailed me like a shadow. Tanzie seemed just as disturbed; she rode hard and fast, her hooves brutally digging into the snow and ice as if she couldn't get us away from the cursed demon House fast enough. We crested the mountain and ran full force to the south side of the castle. Gluttony leaned against the railing outside the stables, a cobalt capelet fluttering in the breeze. He watched our approach, one brow quirked.

"Anything interesting happen?"

I dismounted and patted Tanzie's flank. "What game are you playing at?"

"Currently?" He checked a pocket watch. "The sort where I escort you to your chambers. The masquerade ball begins in a few hours. Your little jaunt almost put us behind schedule."

My little jaunt into being a prisoner. Before I could quip back at him, he was in front of me, blade flashing as he cut the small leather pouch from Tanzie's saddle.

"This"—he plucked a flower out and held it up, the silver roots sparkling as they twisted in the light breeze—"is slumber root. Capable of knocking out even the most powerful royal. What sort of nefarious plans do you have for this evening?"

"None."

"Really?" He sounded disappointed. "You have in your possession a plant most princes fear, and you have no cunning designs on using them against us?" He tossed the pouch of slumber root to me. "Scheme bigger, my friend. Let your inner deviant free."

"Now that I know what it does," I said sweetly, "I'll be sure to put it to use."

"Good. Now let's get ready for some debauchery."

TWENTY-NINE

My beaded gown was extravagant. And heavy. Goddess above, I swore it almost weighed a quarter of my full body weight. A corset was built into the fitted top, and it was tight enough through the hips that I felt as if I'd been dipped in liquid gold. Metal sequins sewn in a series of geometric designs accentuated my curves. Hips, waist, bust. Each section boasted a mix of beads, sequins, and patterns designed to draw the eye.

I twisted in the mirror, admiring the hard work that went into making such a garment.

Champagne-colored silk whispered across my skin. The skirts split in the center, a few inches above my knees, and the beaded portion ruffled over pure, untouched silk. A shiny gold belt with vines and thorns brought an edge of danger to the beauty.

My mask… that was all House Wrath. I'd been informed that the princes could only wear wolf masks, and the rest of the assembly were free to wear whatever they'd like.

The half-mask I'd had made was tasteful. Dark gold with delicate lines of spun glitter, offering the barest hint of snakeskin. I'd left my hair loose and wild, adding a few gold clips to pull it back from my face. I'd just finished the final touches when Wrath walked into the room and halted.

I couldn't stop the coy smile from lifting my lips as I tossed the needle and thread I'd been holding back into my sewing kit. "It will do, I think."

His intense gaze strayed to the mask. “Where did you find that?”

I reached up, brushing my fingers against the cool metal. “A proper gentleman comments on his date’s beauty. Not where she found a mask.”

“Are you my date tonight?”

His tone held a note of teasing. Underneath I sensed a thread of tension, though. I tried not to think about where he was last night, why he never came to my room when he promised he would. I had no idea what Lust wanted but could guess the sort of entertainment he might seek and goad his brother into. The sudden tightening in my chest felt too much like hurt.

“You’re escorting me there.” I lifted a shoulder. “I’m not sure what else to call you. If you’d like me to try, I can probably come up with a few choice descriptions.”

“Of that I have little doubt.”

I openly admired his suit. Ebony and gold—his waistcoat also featured snakeskin, except his was made entirely of metal, like chain-mail armor. “Expecting a battle?”

“Only if you ask me to fight off suitors.”

“Where’s your mask?”

He held out an arm. “Enjoy the mystery of it.”

“I am about to be subjected to the *honor* of having my biggest fear or a secret of my heart torn from me. Enjoying anything about this evening doesn’t feel realistic. I’d like to know what exactly to expect from each portion of the evening.”

“Dinner is next. And I’m certain you will find it pleasing.”

Without offering any more hints, Wrath escorted me down a stunning set of stairs and into a foyer filled with masked attendees sipping from champagne flutes and chatting in hushed tones. The atmosphere tonight was more subdued, but no less enchanting.

Gluttony noted our arrival and clapped his hands once, smoothly drawing the assembled partygoers’ attention. “Everyone, please, go into the dining room and take your seats. The feast is about to begin.”

Wrath led me to our places, and I was happy to see Fauna had been assigned the seat next to mine. Anir was across from her, and that was where my good fortune ended. Lady Sundra glided in, radiant like sunshine, her expression turning stormy when she spied me.

“Lady Sundra.”

Her jaw tightened, and I immediately realized the unintentional trap I’d set for her. With Wrath present, I’d forced her into using my title. “Lady Emilia.”

Envy swept into the room and sank into the chair opposite Wrath—and beside a still-glowering Lady Sundra—with a knowing grin

tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Before he could taunt me with whatever was brewing in his gaze, a chef strode into the room. “Good evening, lords, ladies, and princes of the underworld. Tonight’s menu theme is Fire and Ice. Each mortal land’s dish will represent the chosen elements in some form or another. Our first course is a frisée salad that features ice. You’ll see why shortly.”

An army of servants carried out individual plates and set them before each guest at the same time. Worries over Lady Sundra vanished. I could not tear my attention from the dish. Greens were placed in a circle on a wooden slab, resembling a bird’s nest plucked from a tree.

Sprinkled around the greens were bits of cheese and crushed pecans. In the center was a ruby-colored egg-shaped form filled partially with liquid. It was not simply a salad—it was a work of art, of passion. Creative genius on a level I’d never encountered.

I was happy to see I wasn’t the only one who hadn’t picked up a utensil yet, not quite ready to disturb the edible sculpture.

“A frozen strawberry vinaigrette.” The Prince of Gluttony tapped the faux egg, cracking it and spilling the dressing. He tossed the bits of cheese and crushed nuts into the leafy greens, mixing it all with the dressing. Everyone followed suit, their excited chatter filling the large dining chamber.

Wrath watched me, the corners of his mouth twitching as I cracked my vinaigrette egg and marveled at the dish. “You’re having a terrible time, I see.”

“Dreadful.” Despite the intrusive attention I felt coming from the opposite side of the table, I returned his grin. “It’s almost too pretty to eat.”

Finely cut bits of mint, shaved red onion, and fennel paired exquisitely with the bitter greens. Once our plates were cleaned, the waitstaff quickly disposed of them, making way for our next culinary delight. As if he were a maestro and the food the orchestra he was conducting, the chef reappeared, proudly announcing his next dish.

“Our second course for you this evening features fire. The ‘candle’ is made from bacon fat. As it slowly burns it will create a sauce for you to dip your scallops and shaved, charred parmesan brussels sprouts in.”

Waiters leaned in, lighting the bacon candles in unison. Gluttony encouraged everyone to sip from their wine and watch the candles melt. Bored with the theatrics, Envy turned to the male demon seated beside him. “Any word on the Stars of Seven?”

“Nothing new, your highness. All indications lead to the forest.”

Wrath’s attention slid to his brother. He carefully sipped his wine.

“Chasing fairy tales again?”

“I wonder, dear brother, when I become the most powerful, will you still taunt me?” Envy’s smile was vicious. “Or will you bow down to your new king?”

Lady Sundra subtly glanced at the prince next to her, her gaze calculating.

I pressed my lips together, trying to keep the questions from spilling out. Anir leaned across the table, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. “Power is currency here. Mortals accumulate wealth; our royals do the same with magic.”

“Can the princes of Hell be dethroned by lesser demons?”

“No. They always rule their circles. It’s basically a test of who holds the most power amongst them. Sibling rivalry, if you will.”

“So the devil is a title that can be passed to different rulers.”

The princes near us stiffened, but Anir paid them little attention. “Not always. It more or less influences different eras on Earth. You can see through the ages which of the seven princes held the most power and influence based on the mortal world. Wars, greed, sexual awakenings. And yet,” his whisper was anything but soft, “I cannot seem to recall an era of envy.”

Envy slammed his wineglass onto the table. “Mind your tongue, mortal.”

“Or else…”

Before they came to blows, the chef reappeared, his voice carrying over the chamber. “The third course is our most interactive. I ask that you place the slices of raw, marinated beef over the coals and quickly sear them on each side. Once the meat comes off the coals, sprinkle the frozen bleu cheese crumble across the strips.”

Wrath shifted on my right, drawing my attention. He was focused on the door, where Greed had just walked in and bowed politely. He was in a bronze suit, his hair and eyes matching the exact shade of the metal he seemed born of. There was still that sense of wrongness in his sharp gaze, as if he were not quite as accustomed to the pageantry as his brothers were.

He gave Wrath a small nod before taking a seat at the opposite end of the table. “Apologies for tardiness. Do not stop the feast on my account.”

“Fucking sit, already,” Gluttony muttered. “Chef! Bring out another dish.”

Taking advantage of family dramatics that diverted Wrath’s attention, I leaned over to whisper in Fauna’s ear. “Have you ever heard of the Stars of Seven?”

“Oh, you mean the Seven Sisters. Of course. Everyone here has. In old legends, they appeared to travelers in need, their forms no more

substantial than shadows. Some say encountering them is a blessing, but most here believe it's a curse."

"Why?"

"If you interrupt their celestial spinning, there's a chance they may pluck and weave the wrong thread of fate. Sometimes the results of such interferences are immediate, and others take decades."

"How… intriguing. If they weave threads of fate, they must be able to recall the past. See the threads they've already spun." Fauna gave me a wary look but nodded. "So if anyone would know where lost objects are, it's the Seven Sisters."

"Emilia…" Fauna warned. "You cannot seek them out. Asking about a living being can cause damage to both the past and future."

"I wasn't planning on asking about a being. Only an object."

"Whatever you're scheming, stop. It's too dangerous."

Dangerous or not, I would find the mysterious spinners of fate. One of the enchanted skulls had mentioned "Seven Stars" and "Seven Sins." I'd immediately guessed the demon princes, but hadn't known what the seven stars meant. Now I was fairly confident I did. And the demon who Envy asked at the start of dinner had mentioned a forest.

Excitement thrummed through me. When I'd visited House Envy, he'd made it a point to tell me about Bloodwood Forest. I never did piece together why he wanted me to learn about the Curse Tree fable. I was beginning to suspect he'd also been hinting at something else.

His choice of topic this evening also was no accident. Envy wanted me looking for the Seven Sisters. And I'd wager it definitely had to do with the magical objects he was after; the Temptation Key and Triple Moon Mirror. For whatever reason, he must believe I'd have a better chance at gathering the information from them. Regardless of his motives, this information played into my own quite well.

I tried to recall the map I'd seen in House Envy. I could see the forest but couldn't remember where House Gluttony sat in relation to it.

"Where is Bloodwood Forest from here? The Prince of Envy mentioned it's not part of any royal land, but you have to pass through a territory to get there."

"From here?" Fauna contemplated. "The fastest route would be through Pride's circle."

I glanced around the long table. Wrath, Greed, Envy, Gluttony. I didn't see Sloth but recalled what Wrath had said about him slipping in before the fear ceremony. I sipped my wine and let my gaze travel around the other side of the room. Lust smirked at me from the far end of our side of the table, crooking his finger in a mocking wave.

Ignoring him, I asked quietly, "Has the devil arrived yet?"

Conversation ceased. Hands holding utensils and glasses paused mid-mouth. I might as well have cast a spell to freeze time. Apparently asking about the devil was a taboo subject.

“For our final course,” the chef’s voice cut through the silent room, “we have a combination of fire and ice together. Crème brûlée, fired right at your seat, topped with a garnish of frozen raspberry pearls and shattered mint leaves.”

Once the chef left us to our dessert, warm fingers brushed against my wrist. I glanced up into Wrath’s face. “Dance with me tonight.”

He stood, as did the rest of the princes in attendance. Servants rushed to pull out their chairs before disappearing back into the shadows. “Where are you going?”

“It’s time for us to don our masks.”

“And shed our civility,” Gluttony teased. “See you at the masquerade.”

THIRTY

This prince of Hell certainly knew how to host an unforgettable event.

Despite what negativity the columnist would undoubtedly print about the party, it was entertaining. And spectacular. The ballroom that Fauna and I stepped into dripped decadence from every square inch. In the mortal world Gluttony's sin was thought to be food-centered, but here, in the Seven Circles, it was pure indulgence.

Last night's opening event was a mere glimpse into how far Gluttony could push his sin of choice. Glasses made of diamonds spilled sparkling demonberry wine over tables and trays encrusted with gemstones. More than a dozen crystal chandeliers hung from curved poles set up in even intervals around the dance floor.

Garlands of flowers with clear crystals sewn onto petals were twined around the poles. It looked as if we'd walked into a winter fairy tale. If ice was made of diamonds instead of water. When the candlelight caught the crystals and precious stones, it seemed as if the flames were caught inside ice. Gluttony's theme carried through from our meal in a grand fashion.

"This is—"

"Look!" Fauna nearly squealed. "Over there."

Desserts—glittered with edible gold and fashioned into lifelike fantastical beasts—stood as tall as the guests. Winged ice dragons, beautiful pastel unicorns, three-headed hellhounds. It was as intriguing as it was almost unappetizing. Masqueraders did not seem

to find it off-putting, carving into the flank of a unicorn, indulging in the berry-stuffed cake that resembled blood a little too closely for my tastes. My attention drifted to a platter of chocolate-covered fruits, piled as high as the night Wrath had tested me for this sin.

I swept my gaze around the room, searching for him and the other princes. None of them had arrived at this portion of the party yet. I glanced back at the ice dragon dessert sculpture. “Who won the hunt earlier?”

“I believe his highness did. He seemed intent to win at all costs.”

“Wrath did?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes.” She grabbed my elbow as if to keep herself from taking off. “Look over there. The rumors were true.” Fauna’s tone filled with awe. “He has tryst chambers.”

As if we were moths drawn to the flame of debauchery, we drifted closer. The infamous glass rooms lined the west side of the ballroom. Low candlelight flickered from within them, and the drapery was neatly tied back, ensuring all who passed could look their fill at the romantic displays happening in those not-so-private chambers.

Fauna clutched my arm in a viselike grip, her gaze widening behind her iridescent mask with each room and couple we strode by. The scenes were becoming more uninhibited, more daring. Thank the goddess we were masked. No matter how often I saw such public displays of sexuality, I could not stop my initial flash of embarrassment.

I felt the heat of my blush and knew my face must be close to scarlet.

Fauna was not having the same reaction; she studied the couples, as if committing certain positions to memory. If she had pulled out a notebook, I wouldn’t have been surprised.

“Did you see that?” Fauna’s voice held a hint of appreciation. “I had no idea so many people could fit into such a small chamber, let alone do what they were all doing and maintain their rhythm. That takes tremendous skill.”

“And stamina. *That* is the real feat on display.”

She giggled and swatted at my arm. “To think… these are the tamer tableaus. I’ve heard the twilight garden is much more risqué than I’d originally been told.”

Unbidden, I thought of Wrath. I tried not to let suspicion claw its way back in.

What he did, and whoever he might have seen last night, was none of my concern. I internally scolded myself. If Wrath were here he’d smirk and call me on the blatant lie.

Before I could examine my feelings further, a strange hush descended like a regiment of soldiers surrounding the masquerade. I

scanned the ballroom, searching for the cause of such a reaction. My breath caught. Six imposing figures wearing wolf masks emerged from the corners of the ballroom. Tall, silent, deadly. There was something about them all standing together—their inner battles and schemes forgotten as they became a fearsome unit—that turned a prickle of unease into a fight-or-flight response. Even lords and ladies of Hell seemed ready to bolt.

Tension rolled through the crowd.

My focus landed on the biggest as he prowled forward. Even with a mask covering his face, I'd recognize that confident gait anywhere. Wrath didn't simply walk into a room, he strode in and dominated it. And he wasn't even trying to. Everyone else could fade away and he'd be left burning brightly. A constant source of power and vitality.

The princes slowly circled the crowd, as if herding everyone. Fauna and I shuffle-stepped along with everyone else, the space between us growing smaller with each step we took. Then, once everyone was near the dance floor, the princes turned and watched the stairs.

I dragged my attention from Wrath and waited. In a well-choreographed move, a lone prince made his way down the grand staircase, his hands tucked into his pockets, shoes shining like gemstones in the flickering candlelight. Even from across the massive space, I could hear the faint clap of his steps as the leather soles smacked the marble floor.

Fauna leaned close. "That's the Prince of Pride."

I watched the striking figure stroll through the crowd. Like the other princes, he wore a wolf mask that covered all but his bottom lip and chin. His was silver and gold. Ornate yet retaining elegance. He did not glance at anyone, nor did he acknowledge those who curtsied or bowed as he passed. His hair was a chestnut brown with threads of gold spun in. It was cut close on the sides and stylishly longer on top. Not a strand was out of place.

Not a crinkle to be found in his swallowtail suit.

Dressed in dark navy and silver, he did not blend into the shadows. He stood slightly apart, as if he wished for them to remember who owned them.

I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath, openly staring at him behind the safety of my mask, until I exhaled. *The devil* stood only a few feet away. A figure reviled and loathed by almost all. If the stories were true, here was a rebellious angel, cast from Heaven.

Now the king of demons. So corrupted by sin, so monstrous, that he ruled over the worst denizens of each realm. His silver gaze collided with mine, flashing like a star streaking across the sky. A chill rolled down my spine. If I hadn't accidentally betrothed myself to

Wrath, and if he hadn't accepted the bond, I'd be staring at my husband now.

Pride scanned me from mask to toe, his head tilted to one side. I had an awful feeling he was sizing me up, debating how to best show off his skills as he took down his prey. If Wrath reminded me of a caged panther at times, Pride was a golden-maned lion.

Both princes ferocious. Both deadly. But only one could blend into the night, strike hard and fast under the cover of darkness, then slip away, undetected. I tore my attention from the devil and searched for Wrath. He'd disappeared.

"Hello, Lady Vengeance."

The low, slightly gravelly voice was at my ear. It took all of my effort to not show surprise or tension. I hoped he didn't sense the item I'd smuggled on my person. I slowly brought my attention to the prince at my side and offered a slight incline of my head. He was not my king. And I'd never been instructed to bow. "Your highness."

"Would you honor me with a dance?"

Fauna sunk her teeth into her lower lip, practically dancing on the balls of her feet as she nodded vigorously in encouragement.

"I…"

"You?" He swept his attention around the room, a knowing gleam entering his eyes. The crowd surged back, as if terrified of his attention settling on them. The dance floor cleared. "Is there someone else you were hoping to dance with first? If so, let's make him regret not asking before I did."

"I will dance with you, but there's no ulterior motive in it."

"Of course."

His amusement remained as he whisked me onto the dance floor and the orchestra immediately began playing a waltz. For a few beats, we didn't speak. He simply whirled us around the room, my nerves over dancing in public a forgotten memory as he easily led us through the steps. He was lovely. A shining diamond encapsulated in pure platinum.

Or maybe that was what he wanted me to believe. Maybe he was really a blade. Forged in hellfire and deadly as sin. As we waltzed closer together, I waited for some spark of memory to catch and ignite hidden flames of desire. If he *was* the lover from my vision, my body didn't seem to recognize him.

He leaned scandalously close. "If you're this intrigued by my mask, wait until I take it off."

"I assure you I am not looking at your mask, your majesty. Honestly, I'm trying to find a new set of horns or fangs."

Pride's eyes glittered. "I can be terrifying. When I want to be."

"I'm sure you can, but not like someone I know."

“Wrath?” His mouth turned down at the edges as my gaze searched the dance floor, hoping his name would be enough to summon him. “I’m unused to such beautiful dance partners thinking of my brother while in *my* arms.”

I couldn’t help myself. I laughed in the devil’s face. “You’re exceedingly conceited.”

“One of our most prominent family traits. Though I assure you my ego is well justified.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it, your highness.”

We waltzed across the floor, between other couples who’d joined us, his steps steady and smooth as he led me around and around. Even after Wrath’s impromptu lesson, I’d been worried I’d miss steps or stomp on his feet, but his skill was enough to overcome any of my mistakes. Part of me was disappointed. If this had gone terribly, it might have been my current largest fear.

“The Prince of Wrath is quite serious compared to the rest of you.”

“That’s what he does—he excels at war and justice. Both serious matters. And it’s why none of us have to bother with the messy bits of ruling.” I drew my brows together. “This realm would have ripped itself apart if he didn’t terrify it into submission.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

Pride swung us around until I could see Wrath leaning against the marble column. His mask was tugged back and his gaze followed each step, each glide around the ballroom.

He looked neither pleased nor angered, but there was something about his expression that made me think he was… jealous. Pride lowered his hand, skimming my spine, no doubt purposefully stoking Wrath’s annoyance. I stepped on his foot and internally smiled as he winced.

“He, dearest darling, is the balance. And is usually the only thing standing between us and total destruction. Wrath is impartial justice made flesh. He is feared because he does not hesitate to carry out a sentence, to mete out justice on those deserving punishment. If he must send someone to the Prison of Damnation, what mortals consider their version of ‘Hell,’ it is no light matter.”

Thus far, no one had spoken of the mortal souls sent here. “Where is that located?”

“It’s adorable you think I’d tell you. Have you asked Wrath?”

I had and I was fairly confident he’d said something about an isle off the western shore. “I was under the impression that was what your role is supposed to be.”

“Rules are more fun when they’re broken.” He lifted a shoulder. “Delegating is also part of ruling, is it not?”

Before I could answer, he swept us across the room once again, his

motions fluid and graceful and commanding. Understanding he was no longer interested in speaking of power, I changed tactics. I waited until we were far enough away from other couples, then said quietly, “I know it’s private, but I wanted to offer my condolences.”

Pride tensed beneath my touch. I doubted I would have noticed if we hadn’t been dancing, which was exactly why I wanted to broach this subject on the dance floor.

“Losing someone you love,” I continued when he didn’t speak, “is a horrible kind of pain. I would not wish that on my worst enemy.”

“As I’m sure my brothers and I are counted amongst those you consider foes, it pleases me to hear that.”

It was only partially true, but I didn’t correct him. With the next rotation around the dance floor, his mask slipped back, revealing his mouth. A small diagonal scar carved through his upper lip and ended just below the lower one. I’d seen it before and hoped the rapid beating of my heart was mistaken for the increased tempo he used as we continued dancing.

We were gliding closer to the edge of the dance floor, nearing an alcove hidden by a series of large potted ferns. Just as we stepped close to it, I swung us around and pulled him into the shadowy spot, far from prying eyes. I couldn’t see his full expression, but I heard his sharp intake of breath as I pressed him against the wall and brought my lips to his ear.

Needing no further encouragement, he tugged off his mask, and dropped it to the floor, then went to work removing mine, mistaking our current position for something it was not.

A reaction I’d been hoping for.

“Your brother thinks you’re debauched. Too drunk on wine and lovers to bother with anything of importance.” I pulled back enough to study him. Wariness entered his features. “Yet you were leading your guards around the grounds of House Pride this morning, looking anything but intoxicated.”

“I beg your pardon?” He feigned confusion like a skilled actor. I noticed he didn’t directly address my question, giving him a way to avoid speaking a lie. “I’m here for kissing, not an inquisition. If you’re interested in talking, I can find more scintillating topics.”

He brought his mouth close to mine and I stalled him with a palm to the chest.

“Allow me to speak more clearly, your majesty. Do not stand here, pretending as if I do not recall that you were the one who made me dismount from my horse. Why did you hold me hostage at your House for so long? Was it to hide how many guards you have patrolling your grounds?”

“You cannot expect me to share information with another House.”

“Fine. Answer this for me. Why are you hiding the fact you aren’t nearly as drunk and prideful as you’d like others to believe?”

“As a matter of principle, I rarely show my true face to anyone. You would be wise to do the same.”

My gaze strayed to his scar. I doubted that was the only reason he chose to hide. “You didn’t show up to the monastery that night; you possessed Antonio. To maintain anonymity?”

“Shouldn’t you be asking about the curse?”

A familiar demon deflection tactic; answering one question with another. “I know my birth signaled the end of your curse. Therefore you must have had other reasons to hide.”

His temper flared. My hit to his pride had reached its mark. “I was not *hiding*. I was otherwise occupied.”

“Well, while I’m sure we could talk in circles for eternity, I didn’t pull you aside for a frustrating chat.”

“Then let’s get to the fun part.” Pride dragged his hand down my silhouette and slowly drew it back up, pausing near my thigh. His brows quirked. “What do we have here?”

“My dagger.” I grinned as he abruptly unhanded me. “The fun part is this. I will cross your lands, twice, on a time and date of my choosing, without any interference from you, your guards, or anyone who calls House Pride or that circle their home.”

“Why should I agree to such a bargain?”

“Because I know one of your secrets.”

“My bedroom talents are already widely known.”

His teasing was another attempt to deflect. I had him cornered and he was showing his teeth by smiling as if he was unbothered. I understood where the term *devil-may-care* originated. Pride exuded a carefree attitude perfectly. Suspiciously so.

“I won’t tell your brother about the slumber root. You’ve certainly got enough to knock out an entire army. And that, your highness, sounds like information you’d be desperate to keep to yourself. Unlike the *bedroom* talents you boast about.”

His gaze was hard, calculating. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he jerked his head in agreement. “Fine.”

“You’ll need to be more specific.”

“You may cross my lands, twice, without any issue from anyone who calls my circle their own. In exchange, you will not tell my brother about my slumber root. There.” He glared down his nose at me. “Satisfied?”

“More than you can possibly imagine, your highness.”

Suspicion crept into his features. Rightly so. He’d just made a grievous error.

I turned and strode out of our little alcove, but didn’t make it far

before I was intercepted by another prince. Envy's mask was off now, too, and his green eyes practically glowed as he glanced behind me. "Well played, Shadow Witch. One stone, two princes."

"Are you drunk already?"

"Not on spirits." He flashed the smile that showed his dimple. "I've come to collect you, guest of honor. It's time for you to feed us your biggest fear. And I cannot tell you how hungry I suddenly am."

THIRTY-ONE

I caught sight of Fauna in the crowd; her brown skin had paled considerably beneath her mask. My friend looked around, as if trying to find a way she could distract the assembly and stop this nightmare before it began. Anir stood beside her, his expression radiating enough anger to be worthy of his adopted House of Sin.

He seemed poised to grab the blade I knew was hidden under his evening attire and fight his way to my side. His hard gaze promised anyone who tried stopping him would suffer his fury. He and Fauna both knew there was no getting out of this, but they did not have to like it, or make it easy on the royals. Despite the abundance of worry coursing through me, their show of friendship bolstered my spirits.

I pushed away from Envy's proffered arm and glanced around, searching for Wrath. I needed his familiar scowl to calm my nerves. I rolled up onto my tiptoes, looking past shoulders and heads for the demon prince's imposing figure. Of course, he went missing again.

I didn't see Lust or Greed in the crowd, either. And Sloth must be in attendance—there had been seven princes in wolf masks earlier—but he was also noticeably absent. Or lounging somewhere. Perhaps there was a gaming room that they'd retired to. Part of me wanted to dash around the castle until I located them. Which was only stalling the inevitable. Maybe it was a blessing that all seven princes would not be privy to my greatest fear.

Pride slipped out from the alcove where we'd struck our bargain and sauntered over to a column, leaving me to face this trial on my

own. Not that I was surprised.

"Come." Envy didn't bother controlling the excitement in his voice. "Allow me to introduce you to the master of ceremonies."

I followed him through the parting crowd, pulse pounding with each step we took closer to a dais that had been brought in. A blue-skinned demon with red eyes waited, wicked dagger in hand. It was a miracle my heart hadn't thrashed out of my body. I held each side of my beaded skirts as I walked up the stairs to stand beside the demon. He nodded once, then lifted the blade above his head, showing off the runes carved into it, the crowd going uproarious at the sight.

"Without further ado, if there are no objections, we will release the biggest fear from our guest." The master of ceremonies held out a hand to me. "Lady Emilia. If you will be so kind as to offer your wrist. I must take a bit of blood for the magic to work."

Panic thrummed in each of my cells. I could barely see past the little white spots floating across my vision as I slowly lifted my arm. All our lives Nonna Maria wanted us to keep our blood from our enemies. And here I stood, offering it freely. To a blade etched with magical runes that would steal my secrets.

I held my arm steady, fighting the urge to yank it back and flee.

To his credit, the master of ceremonies did not radiate joy or triumph. He offered a sympathetic look and whispered, "One tiny pinch and it will be over shortly."

The blade felt like ice against my skin. Panic seized me. This was really happening. I squeezed my eyes shut, silently praying to the goddesses for this to—

"Stop." The deep voice echoed. "I will be the one to sacrifice a secret of the heart."

The metal disappeared from my skin at once. I opened my eyes, looking from the master of ceremonies to the crowd. As one, the audience turned, staring with open shock at the demon who'd spoken. I followed their stares until I found him.

Wrath stood with his arms crossed, his attention fixed on me.

"With all due respect, your majesty, you cannot substitute yourself…"

"I won the hunt. I am claiming it as my prize."

The master of ceremonies shook his head as if carefully considering his phrasing. "I… I do not believe it can be completed without great cost to you."

"I am well aware of the price."

I watched in disbelief as Wrath made his way down the aisle and up the stairs of the dais. Was he afraid my biggest fear would have worse repercussions than revealing his truth? Wrath trained me to withstand demonic influence, but he'd never seemed concerned about

this portion of the feast. Had he always known he'd stand in for me?

He was scheming, but I had no clue what his goal was.

Without taking his gaze from mine, he slipped out of his suit jacket and rolled back the sleeve of his left arm. At the sight of our matching tattoos, a murmur went up in the crowd. Apparently not everyone knew our betrothal had been forced.

For them, it was one thing to woo a prince, and apparently another to magically bind him into matrimony. Perhaps they worried his unexpected show of heroics was brought on by a magic spell. The master of ceremonies stared openmouthed at the demon prince. I doubted this prince had ever offered something like this before. Even I couldn't believe it. Wrath, the demon who valued his secrets more than anyone I knew, was offering one up.

For me. In front of every enemy court. It was not a declaration of love, but it was close.

Wrath finally tore his attention from me. "Get the dagger."

"I…" The master of ceremonies fumbled for the blade, clearly uncomfortable with carving into one of the rulers of Hell. "Before we begin, there is still the matter of needing your brothers to vote on this being your prize."

"Oh, for shit's sake. Enough." Pride shot up from where he'd been slumped against a column, his silver eyes narrowing in warning. "This is incredibly dull. Surely there is some other more diverting prize to be claimed? I find secrets tiresome." He stared at his brother in challenge. "Perhaps this year's sacrifice will come in the form of a forbidden tryst. I'm sure we can find a volunteer willing to bed the guest of honor. Then my brother may pick a different prize."

The assembled demons subtly looked from Wrath to their king, their breath held.

"No."

Wrath's tone was cold enough to rival ice. He glanced to me, probably to see if I'd been intrigued by the idea and he'd spoken too quickly. I imagined if I said yes, he'd stand back and not utter a word of protest if I chose to bed Pride. No matter how much he'd hate it.

And hate it he would. Wrath's mask of indifference had slipped and he hadn't put it back.

"There seems to be a misunderstanding." The devil's smile was sinful as Wrath cast a wary glance his way. Pride was practically preening, pleased he'd laid the perfect bait and Wrath had fallen into his true trap. "I did not mean to suggest *I* would be offering services. As Lady Emilia is your intended, I believe *you* ought to be the one to bed her, brother."

I stiffened. If Wrath and I shared a bed…

… we'd be that much closer to completing our marriage bond.

And Pride knew it. He looked undisturbed by the idea; if anything, he seemed eager for me to marry his brother. Which indicated he never cared about the contract I signed and I'd never been his intended. So what in the seven hells was really going on? If the devil's curse had been broken by Vittoria's and my birth, I still couldn't understand why the demons had lied about the brides.

Envy, who'd been glowering at the interruption, suddenly perked up.

Wrath looked to me then, his expression blank except for the slight tightness around his mouth. It was the only indication he wasn't happy with the turn of events.

Whatever he saw in my face had his tone going hard when he addressed his brother again. "Pick another option or stand back and let's vote to complete the ceremony."

"I told you," Pride drawled, "I've grown quite bored of secrets. It's time for a new tradition. I'm sure our host is willing to oblige."

Pride nodded to Gluttony. The prince of this circle rubbed his hands together. "Indeed. I do love breaking the rules. You have two choices. Either bed each other in one of the glass chambers here." He stood aside and with a grand flourish, yanked a gold cord that held draperies back. Inside, an unoccupied candlelit bedroom softly glowed. "Or—"

"Your royal suite," I offered, stunning everyone, myself most of all.

"My suite?" Wrath stared at me as I nodded. "We do not have to change the rules, Emilia. If I want to claim the fear as my prize, I will."

"Only if you gain enough votes." Gluttony's grin widened as Wrath's temper rumbled through the ballroom. "You may have won the hunt, but this is no longer your prize to claim. We're substituting the guest of honor's sacrifice. And she's made her decision. You may choose the royal suite, the glass room, or, best yet, you may stay right here. Take her over the dais, or against the column. Then we can be sure you complete the task."

"Unless you'd like to stand aside and have someone else volunteer," Envy offered, his too-innocent smile indicating he was using the sin he ruled over to taunt his brother. "My vote would be on Gluttony. He is the host."

"No."

Wrath's tone indicated there was no chance in this circle of Hell that he would turn this into a spectator sport and would go to war if his brothers tried any maneuvering.

Gluttony took it all in stride and I wondered if his mood ever soured or if he was permanently happy. "A tryst in your royal suite it

is.” He clapped twice. “Master of ceremonies. Complete the ritual.”

Wrath paced around the quiet royal suite, a mighty predator caged. It did not matter that his cage was a well-appointed bedroom suite with chilled champagne, chocolate-covered fruits, crystal chandeliers, and silk sheets. And a fiancée who craved his touch.

Even if he hadn’t offered one of his secrets to allow me to keep mine, I would want him. It was time to stop lying to myself. To stop pretending that it was only the seductive magic of this world and our bond creating this attraction. I wanted him. It was his imposing figure I looked for in each crowded room. His protection I welcomed and his sin I aligned best with.

Regardless of our past and the circumstances that brought us here, to this moment, together, I wanted this night of passion with him.

The prince did not appear to feel the same. He prowled over to the fireplace and leaned against the mantel, watching as the flames turned silver and writhed before him. He did not speak on our walk here, nor did he look at me once we’d entered his suite.

Without turning to meet my stare, he said, “It’s not too late for me to give up a secret instead. We do not have to do this. I vowed you would have a choice. I stand by my word. My brothers will not vote against me, no matter what they said earlier.”

“I *did* choose.”

He finally turned, his expression thunderous. “Choosing between two less-than-ideal options is not a choice.”

My lips curved upward. “Will bedding you be less than ideal?”

“Do not make light of the situation.”

“I’m not.” My voice lost the teasing edge. “I’ve never wanted to give up a fear or secret. I cannot say the same about desiring you.”

His focus slid from my eyes to my mouth. “This is not the same.”

“Is it the most romantic proposition? There’s no denying it isn’t. However, I cannot say I’m displeased. As you’re an expert at sensing emotions and lies, I should think you know that. Therefore, I’m left to believe you’re upset because you feel as if *your* choice has been stolen.” A different thought occurred. “Or perhaps you don’t want to bed me.”

“Is that what you believe?”

“If you visited someone else last night and do not want to be with me, I understand. We can go back downstairs and I’ll complete the fear ceremony. You do not owe me anything.”

Wrath stalked across the room, and I held my ground. He gently set his hands on my hips and pulled me against him. A little thrill shot through me where our bodies connected. Even through his trousers and my beaded gown, I could feel his truth pressed against me.

"You see?" His voice was rough, deep. It scraped against some inner part of me, making me want to lean into him more. "It is not a matter of wanting you, Emilia."

"Then what is it?"

"Call it selfish. But I do not want there to be any outside forces driving you into my arms." He tilted my face up, his lips hovering above mine. "When you decide to come to my bedchamber, I want you to know whose sheets you're climbing between. I want you to call out my name."

"I know who you are."

"Do you?" His lips lightly trailed across my skin, almost touching the sensitive area of my neck, but not quite, as he brought his mouth to my ear. "I should like to hear you say it."

"Your brothers only said 'tryst.'" I abruptly changed the subject. "They did not specify that we needed to…"

"To?" He leaned back, his mouth twisting up on one side as he waited. The devil knew exactly what I meant. And he'd feign confusion until I said it.

"Fuck. Or fornicate. Though I've only heard the first word in this circle, repeated like a wicked prayer when I left the pleasure garden last night."

His laughter was loud and lovely. I wished I could stuff the crass word back into my stupid mouth as my cheeks pinked and I silently cursed them and the demon.

He brushed his knuckles across my jaw, his expression filled with warmth.

"No, I suppose they did not specify whether we had to fornicate." His eyes darkened to a molten gold. "What would you have me do instead, my lady? This?"

I didn't have time to answer. He trailed little love bites along the column of my throat. I didn't even attempt to rein in the sigh that escaped me as his tongue flicked over my pulse point.

"Tell me what you desire and it will be yours."

I closed my eyes and leaned into his caress. An image of the lovers spread out on the table in the entryway during our arrival crossed my mind. Wrath's mouth moved along my shoulder, his kisses hot and distracting the closer they drew to my décolletage.

"I want…"

He stopped long enough to draw back and look into my eyes. "Yes?"

"… you to take off my gown."

Nimble fingers began undoing the buttons along the side of my dress. Unlike his assistance during our trek through the Sin Corridor, he did not move swiftly. He took his time, as if he knew precisely how each button coming undone was driving me wild with want. Each accidental graze of his fingers on my skin, each hitch of my breath… I was already close to combusting and my clothes hadn't even come off.

He slipped the straps from one shoulder, trailing open-mouthed kisses as he went. Then the other strap slid off, his tongue and teeth following the path. He carefully tugged the top down, halting only when he'd freed my breasts.

"You are so godsdamn beautiful." He looked like a man who'd been offered the finest meal money could purchase after nearly starving. But instead of feasting, he planned to enjoy every bite, savoring it. One thumb slowly passed over my nipple, causing it to tighten with pleasure. Heat pooled low in my belly. "What else would you like, my lady?"

"Pleasure. Seduction." I gathered up my courage. "I want you to stay. All night. With me. And if you even *think* of bowing afterward and leaving like you did last time you touched me, I will hunt you down and make you regret it."

"Threaten me again."

His raw tone indicated he liked it very much. "Twisted heathen."

"Only the best for you."

He took possession of my mouth with his. His kiss dominated, owned. I was only too happy to submit. For a moment. I ran my tongue over his bottom lip, sighing as he took advantage and swept his into my mouth. Conquering, seducing. Just as I'd requested.

I pulled him in closer, tighter, nearer. I missed this. Missed *him*. The way he felt, the sound of his breath catching as he touched me, unleashing his desires and giving in to our connection. His clever fingers cupped my breasts, fondling with maddeningly light caresses that left me desiring more. My gown remained wrapped around my waist. I wanted it off. I wanted his bare skin on mine, his hands free to explore every inch of my body.

I tugged him through the little sitting chamber toward the bedroom, wanting to feel the weight of him pressing me into the mattress. In this, he allowed me to lead, never breaking from his slow exploration of my mouth. He followed me down onto the bed, slowly pulling my gown the rest of the way off. I lifted my hips, helping to shimmy it over them as he tossed it aside.

His jacket and shirt hit the ground next. The only thing left between us were my scandalously thin undergarments and his trousers.

Wrath eyed the ribbons at my sides, looking eager to unwrap the present they offered. And, goddess curse me, I wanted him to tear them to shreds. A slow, triumphant smile spread across his face as he probably sensed my arousal.

He fitted himself between my thighs and bent forward, tugging the ribbons with his teeth. I squirmed beneath him, unsure exactly what it was I wanted him to do next, but knowing his current position was very tantalizing.

He halted his movements. “Is this all right?”

“Yes.” I cupped his face and caressed his cheek. “Please, don’t stop.”

It was the permission he’d been waiting for. Without delay, he finished the task he’d started. Once my undergarments were gone, he admired me for a long moment, his focus searing with its intensity. I fought the urge to close my legs or cover myself.

As if he’d plucked that fear from my head, he glanced at me sharply. “Don’t ever hide yourself from me. Unless you want me to stop, or I’m not pleasuring you the way you like. You are beautiful. And I want nothing more than to do this,” he dragged a finger down the center of my body and I almost saw stars. “With my tongue.”

He gazed deep into my eyes, making sure I saw the truth in his, then he brought his mouth to me. The first stroke of his tongue was a shock of pleasure, electrifying my whole system. I arched up from the bed, body tingling with anticipation of the next touch.

Wrath hooked his arms around my legs and lowered his mouth once more. This time he held me in place, angling my hips up to allow for the most pleasure. Blood rushed through my head. Oh, goddess, every touch was sweet torture. Just when I thought it couldn’t feel any better, he plunged a finger inside me, his mouth moving harder against me.

I writhed beneath him, hands searching for something to grasp, desperate to ground myself in the swirling storm of pleasure lifting me up and away. I gripped the sheets as his openmouthed kisses continued in that intimate place, his fingers pumping in time with each beat of my heart. I was coming undone, chasing that line of fire streaking through me.

My fingers dove into his soft hair, my breath coming in shallow bursts, my pulse pounding through every glorious inch of my body. I was so close.

Wrath’s strokes turned demanding, the demon of war commanding my body to obey his wish and shatter against his mouth. Because he willed it. Desired it.

I rolled my hips forward and he growled in approval, the sound and vibration of it nearly unleashing me. Before I could call out his

name, he moved up my body, pressing his own arousal against me, his mouth crashing into mine. He rocked his hips, the force gloriously rough as our bodies slammed together. He withdrew and moved against me again. And again.

I dug my nails into his shoulders and greedily met his movements with my own.

Each thrust pushed me closer to that edge. The hard length of him sliding against me created friction that heightened my pleasure. His cursed trousers were still on, still preventing us from fully connecting, but it did not stop me from finally shattering beneath his massive body.

With a groan so powerful it damn near shook the bed, Wrath followed me over the edge.

THIRTY-TWO

I lay within the circle of Wrath's arms, my back snug against his chest, as we both caught our breath. He traced the outline of my tattoo with his fingertips, his idle touch stirring a new set of emotions. There was something more intimate about the gentle action than any sexual act or physical expression of love. I wasn't sure Wrath was fully aware he was doing it. Which complicated things more.

I nestled against him, trying to push my worries aside and enjoy the moment.

He pressed his lips to my temple. "Please refrain from wiggling like that. At least for a few minutes."

"Is it painful?"

He smiled against my skin. "Quite the contrary."

Intrigued, and not very good at following commands, I did it again. Wrath's body hardened against me. Goddess above. His thirst for seduction was unquenchable.

I rolled over to face him. "Take off your pants."

He arched a brow. I swept an arm to indicate my naked body.

"I refuse to be the only one completely nude."

"If I remove my trousers, I cannot guarantee there will be much sleeping."

I mimicked his arched brow and waited. I'd never said anything about sleeping. Bold of him to assume he'd figured out my plans. With a sigh, his pants vanished. He tucked me against him and I grinned as I shimmied closer and heard his sharp intake of breath.

“Emilia.”

“Yes?” My tone was innocence sprinkled with sugar. “Is there a problem?”

I should have known better than to taunt the general of war. Wrath did not play fairly; he played to win. From behind, he situated himself right at the entrance of my body, causing my breath to hitch. I went tight and loose at once, ready for him to press himself deeper.

“Tell me, fiancée. Are you certain you want me as your husband?” He gripped my hip in one hand and slid the other under me, pulling me closer. The tenuous hold on my self-control was slipping. I arched into him. “You’re ready and willing to spend eternity here, with me?”

My mind was still deciding but my body was slick and willing. This time when he rocked his hips, his strokes were deliberately slow, tantalizing. Without his trousers on, his velvet skin slid over mine, the sensation pure bliss. I would give up almost anything to experience all of him right now. Except my mission.

With great effort I slipped out from beneath his arms and stood. He put up no resistance or fight. To soften the blow of my rejection, I leaned over the bed and gave him a chaste kiss.

“How about a drink before bed?”

Wrath watched me carefully, but there was no disappointment or hurt in his expression. Only victory. He knew I would not go through with bedding him. “Would you like me to get it?”

“I’m already up. You stay there.” He rolled up onto an elbow and gave me a bemused look as I pointed at him. “No moving. No bowing. You promised.”

“I am a demon bound by my word.”

“Good.”

I picked up my gown and strode over to the sitting room where the chilled champagne waited. Heart thumping wildly, I glanced over my shoulder, ensuring he’d remained in bed, then said a quick prayer to the goddess of lies and deception to guide my hand.

I’d made a vow to someone I loved well before I knew Wrath. And this opportunity was too good to pass on. No matter how much my heart roared in pain, anticipating the break.

I grabbed the item I’d sewn into my skirts, my movements sure and quick. Before I talked myself out of it, I sprinkled a pinch of the mixture into Wrath’s glass, then poured the champagne over it. I dropped a piece of chocolate-covered fruit into each glass. Bubbles fizzed around the unwelcome intrusion, doing a fine job of covering my treachery.

I sauntered back into the bedroom, pleased to see Wrath—as respectful as he was—distracted by the sway of my hips. I hadn’t bothered to put on my night clothing yet. Not that he had, either. His

muscled upper body was bare, though he'd pulled the sheets up around his waist. He patted the spot next to him, a lazy grin curving those wicked lips.

In a different life, I could happily kiss him for eternity.

"To new beginnings." I offered the prince his drink then raised my own glass. *"Iucundissima somnia."*

Wrath's brow crinkled at the last part of the toast. If he recalled he'd once said it to me, he didn't comment. He clinked his glass against mine, then downed the champagne in one go.

I sipped mine and silently counted. His glass hit the floor before I finished my first sip.

"Emilia." He turned a sluggish gaze on me, eyes flashing with fury. And betrayal. The temperature plummeted around us, then returned to normal as he battled an invisible foe fiercely before slowly slumping back.

The mighty demon of war was no longer a threat.

I set my glass on the bedside table, then reached over to brush the hair from his forehead. Whatever peace we'd made would be gone when he awoke. It was a sacrifice I'd been willing to make, but it didn't make it easy. I kissed his brow, savoring the moment before I straightened.

"Sweetest dreams, your highness."

Tonight I was a thief of a different sort as I stole through the corridor between Wrath's suite and mine, slipping in and out of shadows like a pickpocket swiping purses. I crept into my room and raced to the trunk. I yanked out the fur-lined leather pants, thick sweater, and socks I'd brought, tugged on boots, and swung my ebony cloak around my shoulders in record time. I fastened my dagger in my thigh holster and tugged it to make sure it was secure.

In moments I was back in the hallway, rushing down the servants' stairs. With the party still underway, no one was near this end of the castle. I hoped.

Heart thundering in warning, I peered around the corner. A door was propped open in the back of the kitchen—just as I'd suspected—to let out the heat created by oven fires.

With a quick prayer to the goddess of lies and deception, I darted across the corridor, then slowed once I entered the kitchen. I had no idea how long the slumber root would keep Wrath unconscious; given his immense power, I didn't think I had long. I needed to be far

enough away that he couldn't catch me before I crossed into Pride's territory. I rushed across the wide expanse connecting the back of the castle to the stables, not halting until I reached the entrance.

My gaze swept along the outside of the building, landing on every nook and cranny, searching for any sign of movement in the near dark. The grooms must be abed, having tended to the horses after the morning's hunt. I cracked the door just enough to slip inside and rushed along the stalls until I found Tanzie. She snuffed in greeting, her silver-clawed hooves shredding the hay.

"We're going on an adventure, sweet girl."

I quickly saddled the horse, impressed and thankful I recalled the proper steps needed to do so after seeing it done back home on a few occasions. I led her out by the reins, and, bless her, the horse moved swiftly and silently out of the main door, as if she knew stealth was required.

"Take me to House Pride." I swung up onto her and with a quick pat on her flank, we were off. "We're visiting Bloodwood Forest."

Tanzie shot off through the night, snow kicking up behind us as we practically flew over the slopes of House Gluttony. I gripped on with my knees, leaning into the wind.

Each thunderous step made me want to glance over my shoulder, convinced castle guards had been alerted and were in pursuit. We rode through the hills of slumber root, and on our right, where I hadn't noticed it before, was the upper edge of the Lake of Fire.

Sulfur blew in on a cold breeze, lifting strands of my hair and coaxing a shudder. I kept my attention on the castle looming in the distance, tensed for Pride's guards. As if she refused to be taken by any army again, Tanzie pushed herself faster, hooves greedily eating the frozen earth. We skirted the edge of House Pride and blew past it, never stopping or being stopped.

I let out a whoop of joy. One small victory down.

If memory served correctly, I'd pass from Pride's circle into Envy's. I'd already been invited onto Envy's land and he hadn't revoked that permission. With any luck, I would pass through and make it to Bloodwood Forest unscathed.

As we rode like the devil was chasing us, my mind raced with all the thoughts I'd tried hiding during the feast. Envy was after the Seven Sisters. And he'd pointed out the Curse Tree when I'd strolled through his gallery. I might not know specifics about the forest, but I could find that unusual tree thanks to the fable that had indicated it was "deep in the heart" of the forest.

And hopefully the mystical beings who might help me find the Temptation Key or Triple Moon Mirror would be nearby the fearsome tree. At this point, any information they could offer on either magical

object would be useful.

We passed through House Envy without incident. Since the prince of that House was dropping subtle clues in my presence, I didn't think he'd stop my pursuit through his lands. Too soon we came to the smaller tributary of the Black River that bisected Envy's territory and opened on Bloodwood Forest. Tanzie slowed to a near stop and toed the ground, considering the jump. *I* was considering the sight before us. Bloodwood Forest was aptly named. Even under the blanket of a night sky, I saw that the bark was a dark crimson.

Deep into the woods, puffs of smoke floated along like ghostly fog. I had the worst suspicion it was not created by fires, but was the breath of large beasts prowling through the crimson wood. Or maybe it was from some of the demons I'd seen in the journals. The ones who craved hearts and blood. I inhaled and slowly exhaled.

"Ready to find the Curse Tree next, girl?"

Tanzie jerked her head, then charged the ebony river. I forced my eyes to remain open as we were momentarily airborne, my stomach dropping. We touched down and Tanzie didn't pause to catch her breath; she darted through the woods, careening around trees and underbrush.

I'd expected unnerving silence. In reality a chorus of bugs chirped so loudly, it was disorienting. If any predator was near, it would be impossible to hear the attack until it was too late. Tanzie seemed to know that. My mighty hell horse tucked her chin and wove in and around any obstacle that came up. Determined to bring her rider to our destination unscathed.

We rushed through a clearing, and at the edge I caught sight of an Aper demon. It tossed its giant head in the air, and that was all I saw; we left it drooling behind us. Crimson trees flashed by, the colors streaking across my peripheral vision like hundreds of shooting stars dripping blood. I gripped tighter to the reins, counting each beat of my heart. We had to be nearing the center of the forest by now.

A few minutes of hard riding later, Tanzie abruptly stopped.

There, amongst a thick outcropping of crimson wood, was an oversized silver tree. We'd actually found it. I stared a moment, taking it in. The Curse Tree was unmistakable; taller, wider, and different in color from all other trees in the forest. In the moonlight, its silver bark gleamed like an enormous sword thrust deep into the earth. It was beautiful and frightening.

I dismounted and patted Tanzie. "Stay here and stay alert."

She nuzzled my shoulder as if telling me the same.

I inched toward the tree, dagger now in hand. The bugs had gone silent. An ominous mist drifted above the frozen soil, hiding any sign of recent tracks. Roots jutted up like the rotting fingers of slain giants.

I moved closer to better inspect the leaves. They were similar to a common birch, but were ebony with silver veins. According to the legends I'd read, they were both sharp as blades and as fragile as glass.

"Have you come to request a blood wish?"

I spun around, the hood of my cloak falling back. A lone figure leaned on a walking stick, too far away and hidden behind the mist to make out clearly. Tanzie was nowhere to be found.

I gripped the hilt of my dagger and subtly moved into the fighting stance Anir had taught me. "Who are you?"

"The better question is, who are you, child?"

"I am someone in need of information."

I couldn't see her face in the mist, but had the impression she was smiling. "How exceptional. You see, I am someone who has information. And expects payment."

I paused at that, tamping down my initial response to offer her whatever she wanted. That would be dangerous in any realm, let alone this sinful one. "I will pay you in one secret."

"No." The figure moved closer. The hood of her cloak was pulled low, covering her face. "I know your secrets. Better than you, I imagine. I want a favor. Collected in the future at my discretion."

Goddess curse me. It was a terrible bargain. "I will not commit murder."

"You either accept the favor, or you don't. It will all depend, I suppose, on how badly you are in need of information. Consider this a test of courage. Which will it be? Bravery or fear?"

Bravery might be the absence of fear in most cases, but it also seemed a little like acting foolishly for a good cause. I was not worried about being brave. I was interested in watching out for myself, making the best decision I could. If the mystery woman did indeed know me better than I did, then the best choice was to agree. Consequences be as damned as my soul.

"I accept."

Before the words had completely left my lips, the figure lashed out. It happened so quickly I barely registered the sting in my arm. She'd cut me. I glanced up, ready to defend against any other attack, and halted as she carved her palm and placed it to my wound.

She whispered a word, and a blinding flash of light cracked the night sky.

"Go on, then, child. Ask your questions."

"I want to find the Seven Sisters. Are they here?"

"No. They dwell where no sin rules above all."

"That's not an answer."

"When the time is right, you will understand."

I gritted my teeth. Fine. “I want to know about my twin. She was murdered and I need to know which demon house is behind it. If any.”

“You cannot expect to find answers to anyone else’s mystery, when you do not yet understand the mystery of yourself.”

“Isn’t that the purpose of our little conversation? I didn’t agree to your bargain simply to have you toss more questions my way. You cannot tell me where Seven Sisters are, you cannot tell me about my twin. What exactly can you help me with?”

“If you hope to find what you’re looking for, you must pass my test of courage.”

“That was not part of our bargain.”

“Oh, but it is. You, my child, find yourself in the center of your own mystery. Until you discover the secrets of yourself, you will not know the answers to your sister’s mystery. And that is something I cannot tell you. Some truths you must find on your own. What else troubles you?”

I swallowed hard. “My magic. I cannot access it.”

“I may know a way for you to gain it back. And find an answer your heart yearns for. Regarding your prince.” The figure suddenly stood before the tree. “You want to know his truth, then carve his name into the tree and take one leaf.”

I thought back to the fable I’d read, a sick feeling twisting like a knife inside. This robed figure had to be the Crone. The goddess of the underworld. And she was something to be feared. “If I do that and guess wrong, there will be a price.”

“A true act of courage does not come without the risk of a great cost.” Her sharp smile was the only thing I could see and did little to alleviate my nerves. “After you carve his true name and take the leaf, you must shatter it in his presence. If you are correct, you’ll know. If not…”

I swallowed the rising bout of terror. If I was correct and she was the goddess of the underworld, her price would be death. A small detail both Envy and Celestia had left out of my education. “I don’t know for certain.”

“You do know who he is, but you choose to remain in the shadows, comfortable in the dark. Maybe it’s not his truth you fear, but your own. Perhaps you refuse to look too closely at him because of what it reveals about you. He is your mirror. And rarely do we appreciate what stares back at us. That, my child, is where the true test comes in. Are you brave enough to confront your demons? Not many are.”

I glanced down at my magical tattoo—the one that told our story. “This wasn’t the question I came here for.”

“No. But it is the one you’re too frightened to ask. Therefore I inquire again, Daughter of the Moon, not who he is, but who are you?”

“I… I don’t know.”

“Wrong.” She stomped her foot, displacing the mist with her sudden movement. “Tell me. Who are you?”

“I don’t remember. But I’m damn well going to find out!”

“Good. It’s a start.” She gave me a small, knowing nod. “What are you going to do?”

I glanced over my shoulder. Tanzie was back from wherever the Crone had hidden her, those liquid eyes solemn. This choice could cost me my life.

I lifted my dagger and pressed it against the Curse Tree. I was going to carve Wrath’s true name into the wood and do as the Crone suggested: confront the truth I’d been running from.

And if I was wrong… I’d have to pray to the goddesses I wasn’t, or I’d be joining Vittoria in our family’s tomb before the night was through.

THIRTY-THREE

Wrath wasn't in his chambers, nor his library. I checked his balcony and was about to march down into the Crescent Shallows when I decided to pass through the kitchens.

It was one of the last places I expected to find the demon of war, but there he stood, back to me, knife in hand, carving a chunk of hard cheese and adding the perfect cubes to a tray he'd already filled with various fruits.

"You do not need an invitation to join me, Emilia." He hadn't turned to face me. "Unless, of course, you don't want to be in my company."

"I sought you out. I should think that indicates I want your company."

"After you drugged me to get out of my bedchamber, I wondered if that changed."

"That… it had nothing to do with you."

He continued chopping, the knife thwacking the cutting board. "It felt pretty personal, given what had transpired between us."

"I—"

"You do not need to explain yourself."

"I wasn't going to. I was going to apologize that you were a casualty of what I needed to do." Silence stretched between us. "How long were you knocked out?"

"You cannot expect me to share that information."

"No, I suppose I don't."

I strode over to where he worked, admiring his knife skills. The way he'd laid out the fruits and presented them was also impressive. Figs were cut neatly in quarters, berries and grapes laid in appealing heaps. He'd even found a pomegranate.

"I didn't think you enjoyed spending time in a kitchen."

"Neither did I." He lifted a shoulder, his gaze focused solely on his task. "I don't care much for baking or mixing, but butchering, cutting, and slicing are oddly relaxing."

I grinned. Of course that part of the kitchen would appeal to him. Instead of commenting or breaking the moment, I plucked a slice of apple from the platter and popped it into my mouth. I was stalling and well knew it. So much for my test of bravery.

"In some mortal religions, apples are said to be the forbidden fruit."

Wrath paused for less than a heartbeat, but I'd been paying close attention. He did not lift his attention from his mission. "For someone who was raised with witches, I'm surprised you spent so much time with human beliefs."

I chose another piece of fruit. "I've also heard that figs, grapes, and pomegranates are contenders for the forbidden fruit."

"You've put a great amount of thought into forbidden foods."

"I visited the Curse Tree." He kept carefully cutting the hunk of cheddar on his board. I moved around the other side of the table so I could face him. "I made a bargain with the Crone. And something she said made me think of forbidden fruit and trees of knowledge."

Wrath's knuckles were white as he gripped the knife tighter. "And?"

"I wanted to know about my sister, but she insisted I needed to discover *my* truth first. To face my fears. She said part of my truth can be found if I acknowledge who you are." His gaze collided with mine. "She told me to carve your true name into the tree."

"Please tell me you refused to do so. The Crone is worse than my brothers."

I slowly shook my head and set the ebony and silver-veined leaf down. Wrath stared at it, looking as if I'd brought a viper into the room. I raised my fist to smash it and his hand shot out, covering mine. He tugged me close, holding my hand against his heart. It was pounding fiercely.

"We will go back and strike another deal with the Crone."

I drew back enough to look him in the eye. "You're nervous."

"You carved a name into a tree that demands blood in exchange for truth." He blew out a frustrated breath. "Of course I'm wary."

I moved my free hand to cup his face. That wasn't the full truth behind his nerves and we both knew it. "I know who you are."

"I highly doubt that."

His tone indicated if I knew his truth, I would not be standing so near, embracing him as I was. His secret terrified me, but I would never get past it if I didn't bring it into the light. I would never discover who I was, what happened to my twin, if I remained afraid of the truth. The Crone was right. I'd grown accustomed to the dark, I'd been kept in it for so long. First from Nonna, and now by my own design. It was time to set aside my fears and step into the light.

Before he could register what I was doing, I kicked the table as hard as I could, sending it tumbling over, the fruit and cheese and Cursed leaf shattering in the rubble.

He wrapped his arms around me, as if he could shield me from the Curse Tree collecting its price. But I did not feel any sudden onslaught of pain. Nor did I weaken or lose consciousness. I did not die. Did not even bleed.

Wrath held me tighter, his breathing coming hard and fast.

Tears suddenly pricked my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. Standing there, safe in the circle of Wrath's arms, meant I was right. And the Crone was correct once more.

Now that I possessed the truth, I didn't know what to do with it. I thought I'd been prepared, thought I could handle his secret being out in the open. I'd been wrong.

And I hated myself.

I exhaled a shaky breath, needing a moment to fully digest what I'd discovered. Wrath sensed me tunneling inward and reluctantly dropped his arms and stepped away, putting much-needed space between us. He said nothing, only waited patiently for me to speak.

Blood and bones. This was hard. But I'd been through worse, and I'd survived.

No matter what happened next, I'd survive that, too.

"When you brushed off the name I'd called you in the monastery, I'd wondered if there was a reason why you didn't react more strongly." I swiped at my eyes, still not looking at him. "You acted as if it meant nothing, that I simply irked you." I smiled down at my hands. "Because, according to Nonna, a prince of Hell will never reveal their true name to their enemies."

I could feel his attention boring into me, but I still could not meet his gaze.

"I know witches and demons are enemies. But there's more to our story, isn't there?"

"Emilia…"

"You are temptation. Seduction." I finally dragged my focus to his arm, nodded at the intricate snake tattoo. "The serpent in the garden. The one who'd encouraged mortals to sin."

I pulled my attention higher, finally settling it on his eyes. I took him in, *really* looked at him objectively. His face, his body, his entire presence and how he carried himself screamed authority. Domination. And was designed to seduce. He was temptation made flesh.

His expression shuttered as he waited. Now, more than ever, I desperately wished I could sense his emotions. Though I suspected he was sensing mine, and that was why he'd grown so distant. His armor was firmly back in place. And he was shielding himself from me.

"I don't know how you've fooled humanity for so long, but it's as Envy said. You are the most skilled liar of all. *Samael.*"

His true name seemed to unsettle him. It didn't look as if he'd taken a breath since our conversation began. He exhaled now. "Prince of Darkness. King of the Wicked. I have been called many things, but I am no liar."

I searched his face. I'd been right. I knew it the moment the tree did not collect its due, but the truth was hard to digest. Wrath was the devil. The evil feared the world over.

And I'd stupidly fallen for his seduction. For his smoldering gold eyes and keen wit. His pride in his appearance. The way he protected those under his care and chose justice over revenge. No wonder the mortal world confused the two princes so easily—Pride and Wrath certainly shared a lot of similarities.

"You had plenty of opportunities to tell me you were the devil. *You* were the one cursed by La Prima. Did Pride's wife even die, or was it your consort?"

"I have not directly lied to you."

"Stop omitting things."

"Unlike Pride, I've never had a consort. But yes, I was cursed by the First Witch. As were all of my brothers. My penalty for not aiding her was steeper—she stole something very important to me. Something I will do nearly anything to get back."

"The Horn of Hades," I guessed, thinking of the devil horn amulets.

I hadn't missed them. If anything, I felt… relief at my charm's absence over the last few weeks. It was completely at odds with how I'd felt when he'd first taken them back. Though I suspected it had to do with my painful experience in the Crescent Shallows.

I recalled my worry over the devil being mad at Wrath for letting me borrow the *cornicello* that night. How foolish I must have seemed to him.

"You were the only one who didn't seem to want them. Which I suppose indicates you wanted them more than the others, and didn't want to appear too eager and raise suspicion."

"They are my wings, not horns. Your first witch cursed them into

a mockery of mortal lore, then hid them from me." He seemed to be lost in a memory. One that had his hands fisting at his sides. When he looked at me again, a cold fury burned in his eyes. "In order to restore them, I need a spell found in her grimoire."

"You have wings." Because he was an angel. Goddess above. It was one thing to suspect it, and another to have that suspicion confirmed.

"Had."

There was a world of anger and pain wrapped in his voice. Part of me wanted to go to him, soothe the emotional wound that was still raw. Instead I remained where I was, reeling.

His wings were a connection to the angelic world. The realm he'd left behind. It was hard to believe the devil mourned something that tied him to the place he'd hated enough to be thrown out of for eternity.

Or maybe none of that was true. Maybe those were just more mortal tales, twisted and slightly wrong through the passage of time. Wrath didn't seem like evil incarnate. Or some grand seducer. Except… he had slowly worked himself into my life. And my heart. Was that not proof of seduction? Of a slow scheme unfolding?

"Emilia." He reached for me and I flinched. His hand dropped away. "I can sense your basic emotions, but I want to know how you really feel."

"You're the devil."

"So you've reminded me."

"But Lucifer… Pride… I don't understand."

He heaved a great sigh. "My brother's sin of choice makes it nearly impossible for him to deny being the king of demons. Mortals assume that's who he is, and his pride keeps him from admitting the truth. He's only too pleased to feed his ego. I harbor no emotions one way or the other about my true title. It is a duty to me. An obligation thrust upon me. Nothing more. If anything, with Pride soaking up the prestige, it allows me to complete my job without posturing."

"Has anything been real between us, or has it been a careful seduction? A bit of truth sprinkled in with the lies."

"Tell me." His eyes narrowed. "When you agreed to marry Pride, thinking he was the devil, did it matter then?"

Unbidden, a memory came back to me. "In the Crescent Shallows, the night we… you called me your queen."

"You came here, believing you'd be Queen of the Wicked. That is all true. If you choose to complete our marriage bond, you will be not simply my queen, but *the* queen." He searched my face, his expression turning remote. "The only change is which brother you will be marrying. Everyone in this realm knows who I am. My true title. It's

only mortals who assume otherwise. So, I ask once more, does it truly matter now that *you* know who I am?"

"I'm honestly not sure. It's a lot to absorb. You are the devil. Evil incarnate."

"Is that who you know me to be?"

"Outside of this realm, it's what the whole world thinks of you."

"I am not interested in what others think. Only you." He stepped back and inclined his head. His movements stiff. "Thank you for your honesty. That is all I needed to hear, my lady."

"Wrath, wait. I—"

He vanished in a glittering cloud of smoke.

THIRTY-FOUR

"I'm sorry," I whispered to the empty room. Smoke hung in the air several long moments after Wrath left. I stared at it, eyes burning, wishing I could cast a spell to reverse time. It would be so much easier to simply forget what had happened. Or, better yet, forget the truth of his name. His title. And the way my heart ached at the thought of any or everything between us being part of some larger game.

I leaned a hip against a table, surveying the mess on the floor. It seemed a fitting metaphor of my life. Each time I thought I was closing in on the truth surrounding my twin's murder, something new got added to the heap, distracting me with more trash to pick through.

Thanks to the curse being sentient and having an active role in keeping its secrets, it was nearly impossible to fit the puzzle pieces together.

An old worry crept back in. I'd started to think I'd been experiencing forgotten memories, usually after or during some romantic encounters with Wrath.

If I wasn't the consort, was I the First Witch? I'd been almost convinced the Matron of Curses and Poisons was the First Witch, but now that seemed less likely. I couldn't imagine Wrath keeping her around, knowing that she'd stolen his wings.

Was locating the First Witch the true reason behind the murders? It would make sense for someone to try and find her and make her pay for all she'd stolen. And if every prince of Hell lost their wings, or something as precious, then it could be any one of them.

If I was the First Witch, it would also make sense why Wrath had hated me the night I'd summoned him. He'd called me a creature then, swearing he'd never be tempted by me when I'd mistakenly believed demon bargains were sealed with addictive kisses.

"Congratulations, Emilia," I scoffed. "You have fully given into madness. And paranoia."

Speaking out loud to myself wasn't helping to soothe worries of growing madness. I almost cackled at the thought. Maybe I *was* losing all sense of reality.

Perhaps there was a tonic I could take to rid all memories and foolish thoughts from my mind. Wipe the slate clean and begin anew.

I snorted. It was preposterous and… and entirely possible. There was someone in this castle who was gifted with creating tonics and tinctures. Someone who just might possess the skills needed to break any curse placed on me. First Witch or not, I could use her help.

I hurried to visit the Matron of Curses and Poisons, praying to every goddess I could think of that she would be in her tower.

"Daughter of the Moon." Celestia gave me a bemused look as I rushed past her and motioned for her to close the door. "What brings you here?"

"Do you know who I am?"

It was hard to tell if her hesitation was out of concern for my well-being, or if she was treading carefully around the truth. "Yes, my lady."

"Not my courtesy title. Have we met before?"

Now her perusal was sharper. "Have you ingested something peculiar?"

"No." I walked in an agitated circle. "I experienced some memories that didn't seem to belong to me at first. Now I'm not so sure. Is there a tonic you can give me? Something to detect a curse or break it?"

"Sit." She glided over to the little table and stools she used to work. I followed and perched on the edge, knee bouncing. "Give me your hands." I leaned over the table and did as she asked. "Sometimes forgetting can be a gift."

I wrapped my hands around hers, thumbs resting on her wrists. "Do you speak from experience?"

"I speak as one who wishes for such a present."

"Am I the First Witch?"

Celestia's expression softened. "No, child."

"Are you?"

"No."

I released her hands and sat back. Her pulse hadn't ticked faster for either of my questions. "I admit I'm only marginally relieved. The more I learn of her, the more she doesn't sound like the hero of our fables."

"Every villain thinks themselves the hero. And vice versa. In truth, there's a little villain and hero in each of us. Depending on the circumstances."

I glanced around the circular chamber, my attention pausing on the carved skull. "I've been trying to solve a riddle. About a key that doesn't necessarily open a lock. And seven stars and sins, and the angel of death."

"You seek the Temptation Key." Celestia heaved a great sigh. "I can tell you this, Daughter of the Moon, you have already found it." I whipped my attention back to her. "If I were you, I would reconsider. Once you march down this path, there is no returning from it."

"Whoever killed my twin should have thought of that." I stood. "Is the Temptation Key here, in House Wrath?"

"It is dangerous. Divine objects… they are not to be taken lightly."

"But it *is* here."

Celestia pressed her lips together. It was enough confirmation for me. I thought back to my conversation with Envy, when I'd mistaken his ramblings for drunkenness the night we'd had truth wine. He'd mentioned not all keys appeared the way one typically thought they did.

Blood was the key to unlocking demon magic, for example. So with that in mind, there were no limits to what might actually unlock the Triple Moon Mirror. The Temptation Key might be an elixir, for all I knew. And yet… something toyed with the edges of my memory.

If Wrath had a divine object and wanted to keep it hidden, there was no safer place than in plain sight. Wrath made the obvious questionable, casting doubt. It was the same way he'd acted when I'd first called him Samael back in Palermo.

I doubted he'd keep the Temptation Key in his bedchambers. Which led me to believe the key was in one of two places. His personal library, or the weapons room.

I stood, ready to rush off and tear them both apart if I had to.

Celestia snagged the sleeve of my gown, halting my exit. "If you do this, prepare for consequences that will be out of your control."

"Very little is in my control now, matron. The only thing that will change is I will finally know the truth."

Celestia dropped my arm and stepped aside. I wasted no time

racing to the weapons room. I'd half-feared Wrath would be there, working off excess emotions after our conversation. It was silent, empty. I hurried through each portion, running my hands over every gold design, searching for any secret compartment or object that might be a key.

I halted in the back of the room near the serpent mosaic. Like the first time I saw it, I swore there was something familiar about it… my mind raced, searching for a memory.

"Blood and bones." I gripped the roots of my hair and gently tugged. *"Think."*

I'd seen it before. I would bet whatever was left of my soul. If only I could—

"Devious demon. You're brilliant." I clapped a hand over my mouth to keep from screaming in glee. "I've got you now."

I stood over Wrath's desk and picked up the serpent paperweight.

Or what I'd originally mistaken for a paperweight. Turning it over, I studied the ridges and geometric design with a different eye. It could certainly be a key. Given the shape, it would fit on top of a hand mirror nicely. And it would explain why Envy had shared this information.

Without an invitation to House Wrath, he would not be able to search the castle himself. Showing up outside in the garden for a minute or two was one thing, but strolling through Wrath's personal library would be another. Though, knowing Wrath, he likely had the interior warded to keep his brothers out. None of that mattered.

I held the Temptation Key to my chest, feeling the first pangs of hope. I wasn't sure why Celestia worried so much about touching a divine object. Thus far it only gave me peace. Joy. After all of the starts and stops, this was a tangible lead. A true thread to tug on. Now all I had to do was locate the Triple Moon Mirror. And, armed with the key, I had a new plan forming.

Back in my personal suite, I pulled out my notes and a pen. If I could just figure out the enchanted skulls message, I would have a direction.

~ Enchanted skulls ~

Skull one: Angelus mortis lives. Fury. Almost free. Maiden, Mother, Crone. Past, present, future, find.

Skull two: Seven stars, seven sins. As above, so below.

I tapped a quill against my lips, staring at the notes, willing the answer to manifest itself. The first skull's message was a little clearer now. I was positive it related to the Triple Moon Mirror and its ability to see into the past, present, and future.

It was the second skull's message that I kept getting caught on. Knowing what I did now about the seven stars being another name given to the Seven Sisters, and the fact that Envy was interested in locating them, I wondered…

I sucked in a sharp breath, distracted by a new thought. If Wrath kept the Temptation Key in plain sight, then maybe he'd done the same thing with the Triple Moon Mirror. Maybe he couldn't *tell* me anything about the curse, but he'd tried to help in a subtler way.

The case Envy had would fit a hand mirror. One such mirror had been gifted to me before I'd left for House Envy. Hope had me clutching the key and racing into my bathing chamber, pulling out the gorgeous mirror from where I'd kept it in the vanity. I'd admired the etching on the back before, but hadn't considered it might be more than a pretty design.

Excitement filling my chest, I placed the Temptation Key on the back of the mirror and twisted. Or tried to. Finding the correct alignment was difficult. I shifted it a few more ways, tried several directions. I flipped the key over and studied the raised lines. Some of the excitement dissipated. They didn't look like a match, but I didn't want to give up just yet.

After trying every way I could to fit the two objects together, I finally accepted the fact that the pieces did not match.

I trudged back into my bedchamber and plopped back onto the bed, rereading the notes. What I needed to do next was find the Seven Sisters and ask if they knew where the Triple Moon Mirror was. The skulls had to be the key to figuring that out, if only I could solve their riddles.

Seven stars, seven sins. As above, so below.

I inhaled and exhaled, emptying frustration and previous theories from my mind. The Crone had said something I'd only partially paid attention to. I concentrated on that conversation, her words slowly coming back to me about the Seven Sisters. *They dwell where no sin rules above all.*

That was it. I stared at the message delivered by the second skull

again.

Seven stars, seven sins. As above, so below.

I'd been so convinced the seven sins was the easiest part to decipher, but that might not be true at all. Perhaps it was the simplicity of that portion of the clue that was meant to stand out. I thought it referred to the seven princes of Hell. But what if it was a place within the Seven Circles? "As above, so below" typically was used to indicate balance.

The clue might point toward the place where all seven sins were used equally, where none ruled above the others. Just as the Crone had hinted at.

The Sin Corridor.

Heart thumping, I grinned down at my notes. That had to be it.

The Seven Sisters were somewhere in the Sin Corridor, and I had a feeling they were in possession of the mirror. It would explain why they kept moving through the realm, hiding from the princes. They were either magical thieves or keepers of the peace.

Regardless of the role they played for the demon princes, they were *my* salvation.

I hastily packed a satchel of supplies—the Temptation Key, the Crone's spell book I'd stolen from Envy, extra stockings, and dried fruit I'd pilfered from the kitchens—and changed into something warmer.

I stripped my dress off and replaced it with my fur-lined leather trousers, a lace-up tunic, and velvet cloak. I yanked on boots that went up to my thighs and snagged the strap of the bag as I rushed outside. I paused near the stables, the selfish part of me wanted to bring Tanzie for company, but I had no idea what I was looking for and didn't want to miss anything by riding too fast. This was something I needed to do alone.

Before I could talk myself out of it, or draw the attention of any nosy members of House Wrath, I set off toward the edge at the back of the property and slid down the steep mountain. In record time I was on semi-flat ground again. I glanced behind me—the mountain Wrath had opened with a whispered word was as tall and as imposing as I remembered it.

I hoped I'd see it again soon.

With an image of my twin in my mind and determination in my heart, I began my trek through the unforgiving mountain pass. This time I was prepared for the subtle prodding of emotions. And I knew how to fight off demonic influence. I felt the first licks of power

sliding along my skin, searching for a place to sink its teeth in. I bared *my* teeth at the realm. Even without the use of my magic, I was not helpless. I had a dagger and newfound grit.

"Do your worst."

I was certainly going to do mine. I trudged through snow that gradually reached the top of my knees, my steps slow and unsteady. I didn't think of the cold and ice. They were distractions. I kept my attention on my surroundings, looking for any hint of the Seven Sisters.

The first time we'd walked through here, I'd sworn I'd seen women using bones as knitting needles. I convinced myself it was my mind playing tricks, but I didn't think that was the case. If the Seven Sisters made themselves known to me then, I prayed they'd do so again, especially now that I was no longer walking with the enemy.

A third of the way up an enormous section of the mountain, an ice storm struck. I pulled the hood of my cloak up and continued on. Little pellets struck me, over and over. As if furious with my defiance. The realm was wrong there. It was not defiance that drove me forward, taking step after excruciating step through this hell. It was love.

This journey may have begun with vengeance and revenge, but below that, it had always been about the love I felt for my twin. Nonna had been right; love was the most powerful magic. And I would harness it and—goddess above. I stopped walking, my attention catching on something that didn't form naturally on any tree.

I squinted at the giant cedar and felt the blood drain from my face as I beheld a carving.

VII

"Hello?"

I reached for my dagger and glanced around. There were no sounds, no footprints, no otherworldly indications the Seven Sisters were near. But that seven carved into the trunk… I'd been taught to never overlook the signs. And that one was glaring.

I circled the tree, not finding anything else unusual about it. It was average sized, if not a bit more sparse than the surrounding cluster of cedars. I replaced my weapon in its sheath and dropped to my knees, digging through the snow. There *had* to be something here.

A few painful moments and frozen fingers later, my nails scraped against frozen earth. I tried scratching the surface and only succeeded in breaking several nails.

I stood, hands fisted at my sides, and tried to rein in my temper. The Sin Corridor sensed my momentary lapse in control and pounced. My favorite sin unleashed my fury, and I screamed, the sound muffled and smothered by the freshly falling snow.

I released all of my emotions, kicking at the snow, snapping branches off, and beating the ground. Sweat beaded my forehead and I couldn't stop. I brought my fist to the tree and punched it as hard as I could.

"Godsdamnit!"

Pain lashed up my arm. I winced at my bloody knuckles, the fight and fury immediately leaving me. Godsdamn fool's errand. Ridiculous riddles and… a thought occurred to me as blood dripped into the snow. On a hunch, I smeared a few drops on the tree, right across the Roman numeral seven. There was no moment of hesitation—the trunk clicked open, revealing a set of stairs hidden within it. I walked around the tree again. It didn't seem possible for such a large set of stairs to fit inside, but I was finished asking questions. Now was the time for answers.

I said a prayer to the goddesses and stepped inside. The hidden door closed behind me, and torches flared to life. I went to grab my dagger again, but some innate feeling warned me against it. I don't know how I knew with such certainty that I would not find a foe here. In fact, I feared any act of aggression might work against me. If I was about to locate a divine object, I needed to have faith that all would be well.

I inhaled deeply and pushed on. The stairs were wooden, semicircular, and curved around an enormous trunk. I took sure, confident steps, excitement and trepidation pumping through my veins the closer I got to the bottom. At the ground level a small stone chamber greeted me, a solitary pedestal in its center. And there it was. It *had* to be. I paused, taking in the sheer beauty of the mirror that was on display. Crafted from what appeared to be a combination of mother-of-pearl and raw moonstone, it was the most magnificent thing I'd ever seen.

It glowed from within. I stood before it, hardly noticing the tears spilling down my cheeks until the drops hit the mirror and sizzled. I set my satchel down and went to reach for it when candles suddenly lit around the chamber.

Seven ghostly shadows flickered in the light. They didn't speak. Did not make a move toward me. They waited. The Seven Sisters had arrived. It was not fear, but awe I felt, deep in my soul. And a sense of familiarity.

"Hello, I'm—"

"About to make a critical choice. What you set into motion here,

cannot be undone." Celestia emerged from the opposite end of the chamber, her strange starlit eyes glowing. I should have been surprised by her appearance, but I wasn't. "I offer one last chance, child. Walk away."

"I cannot."

She gave me a long look, then smiled. It was one I'd seen before, half-hidden behind a cloak, deep in the Bloodwood Forest. *Now* I was surprised. I stared at her for another second, unable to believe the truth before me. "You're the Crone." She nodded and I took a quick breath to digest the information. "Does Wrath know?"

"We mustn't waste time speaking of him. I am calling in my favor, Daughter." She strode over to the Triple Moon Mirror and gazed at it lovingly. "Once you activate the mirror, I ask that you return my spell book."

"That's all?"

"No, child." She turned her attention back to me. "That's *everything*."

Celestia waved her hand at me, and a strange tingle settled over my skin, feeling as if invisible threads were snipped and whipping across my body in rapid succession.

A wave of magic bubbled up inside me and I dove into my source, almost crying out in elation when I tunneled past the wall that had erupted.

She gave me a knowing look and motioned toward the shadows. They peeled away from the wall and moved beside her. "When you receive your answers, come find me. I'll expect my payment without delay."

THIRTY-FIVE

I sunk onto the floor inside the magic tree and flipped through the spell book, the paper rustling like dried leaves as my fingers trembled. A note that hadn't been there before fell out. I gingerly picked it up and read the carefully penned lines.

Some truths do not grant the freedom you seek.
Once known you can't ever go back.

Choose wisely.

—S.

Samael. *Wrath.* His note was eerily similar to the warning issued by the Crone, but for me, no matter what, there was no going back or moving forward until I granted my sister eternal rest and peace. I traced the *S* he'd signed the message with, his truth I could never again deny.

I wasn't surprised Wrath had found the stolen grimoire. He was, after all, searching for a spell to restore his cursed wings. However, I *was* surprised that he'd left the spell book alone, even after deducing that I'd take it from his House of Sin.

He knew firsthand how truth could cut as much as it had the

power to heal. I'd shown him that. He had proven through his actions that he wasn't as evil as the world believed. He was a blade of justice and he cut down those who'd been condemned without emotion.

A soldier following orders, ruled by duty and honor.

And I'd been unable to tell him I saw that. Saw *him*. He was the balance of right and wrong. He was neither good nor evil; he simply existed, just as he'd once told me.

Candles flickered wildly, casting shadows around the darkened chamber. The Crone and Seven Sisters had disappeared, leaving me alone to my task.

I ignored the fear pressing in, stealing my breath. Maybe it was my brush with an actual goddess—something I hadn't quite wrapped my mind around—or maybe it was this subterranean chamber, but I'd never been one to get squeamish over small spaces or being in cellars. I refused to start now. I was so close. So close to the truth that had evaded me all these months.

If all went well, in minutes, I'd finally know what had happened to my sister.

I paused. The Triple Moon Mirror might show me the moments leading up to my twin's death. Or worse, I might witness her murder firsthand. It was one thing to come upon her brutalized body after the fact, but to watch it happen… I shuddered.

"Be brave." I found the spell I'd marked a few nights before and exhaled. This was it. No matter what I saw now, I'd know who had taken Vittoria's life. "Past, present, future, find. Show me my biggest desire hidden deep within the universe's mind."

At first, like the summoning spell I'd used on Wrath, nothing happened. I stared at the hand mirror, willing the biggest desire of my heart to the forefront of my thoughts. I pictured my twin, and, for the first time in months, could imagine her crystal clear. I heard her carefree laughter, smelled her lavender and white sage scent, felt the strength of her love for me.

A bond so powerful death could not diminish it.

Light flickered in the mirror, followed by swirling dark clouds. It seemed as if a storm were brewing in the glass. Magic buzzed through the metal, startling me, but I held tight, unwilling to look away or drop the Triple Moon Mirror now that I had it.

The storm inside it persisted, but muffled voices now slipped in. My pulse pounded. I willed the storm blocking my view to subside, to grant me the chance to see my twin.

Slowly, as if the scene had been captured in a jar of honey and lazily tipped over, dripping into view, a room emerged. There were windows set inside a nook. Outside, snowcapped mountains towered above mist. It took a moment to place, but it looked like the chamber

where Wrath held Antonio prisoner.

The mirror's vantage point shifted farther back, allowing more of the space to be seen.

I blinked as the oversized leather chair was plainly visible. Along with the human who'd murdered my twin. He was in the middle of a conversation, but whoever he spoke to was just out of view. Then I heard the other voice. And my heart stuttered.

"… my bidding well."

Vittoria. Unshed tears stung my eyes when I realized it must be an illusion. Antonio hadn't been speaking to a person—someone probably sent an enchanted skull to him. I had no idea how this one sounded so close to the real thing, especially when mine had sounded slightly wrong, but I desperately wanted it to speak again. No matter that the voice was clipped and edged in steel, it was the closest I'd come to hearing my twin in months.

I silently begged the voice to speak again.

Prayers answered, a woman strode over to Antonio and perched on the arm of his chair. She wore lavender gauze that seemed to blow on some magical breeze. Dark hair cascaded in loose curls down her back, and her bronze skin practically glowed. She looked like a painting of a Roman deity sprung to life. And yet there was something so familiar about her casual pose.

"Holy goddesses above. It cannot be."

The woman looked strikingly like my twin. At least in profile. She turned as if sensing a magical presence in the room that didn't belong. Lavender eyes, not rich brown, glared at me. Or whatever she sensed about the mirror. Her face was familiar and foreign at once.

It was Vittoria, but not.

I could barely process what I was seeing. My mind churned slowly through my emotions as I sorted through the image being shown to me. Vittoria was in House Wrath. With Antonio. She must have come here before she was killed. But Wrath swore he didn't know her… and I would not doubt him again. Which meant it was not an image from the past. It was either the present or the future. And somehow, someway, my sister was alive. At least in this realm.

Tears threatened again, but I held them back, unwilling to miss a single second of the image playing out in the magical glass. The Vittoria in the mirror cocked her head, still staring toward whatever magic my presence created. I thought of her diary, of how she'd claimed she could hear magical objects speaking to her. Perhaps the Triple Moon Mirror was chatting now.

"Vittoria!" I shouted, waving my hands. "Can you hear me?"

"It's time." She tore her gaze from my direction and fixed her attention on Antonio. "Are you ready?"

“Yes.” I couldn’t see Antonio’s face, but he sounded breathless. As if he knew he was in the presence of something awe-inspiring. “I vow my life to your cause, my angel.”

Vittoria patted his head, then stood. “Give me one moment, then we’ll be off.”

“No!” I screamed. If this was the present, I could not lose my twin again. I almost dropped the mirror in my haste to get to the tower dungeon. I managed to place it in my satchel and dashed up the stairs, racing around and around until I reached the tree trunk door.

I darted into the night, racing through the Sin Corridor, tripping over the roots and rocks I hadn’t noticed the first time. Bloodied and bruised, I pushed harder and faster. I had to get to House Wrath. In far less time than should have been possible, I burst through the doors, doubling over as I caught my breath. Anir’s dagger was at my throat.

“Devil’s blood, Emilia. I thought…” He sheathed his blade and offered a hand. “Are you hurt? Wrath couldn’t detect you anywhere.”

“Where is he?”

“You’re bleeding.”

I could not care less. *“Where is he?”*

“He just left for the Sin Corridor. It’s the only place he can’t sense you.”

“I need to get to the dungeon tower. Get Wrath. Now.”

Anir shouted something, perhaps a curse, or a plea, but I didn’t dare stop. I had no way of knowing if the scene I’d been shown was the present or future. But one way or another, my sister was here or would be here, and I didn’t know whether to laugh or scream or collapse in tears.

I raced up the stairs, up and up as I climbed with energy and strength that seemed to be endless. Without stopping to collect myself, I wrenched the door open. Wrath said he had magicked it to my hand, and he hadn’t lied.

“Antonio?” I called out, fully stepping into the room. A taper smoked from the chairside table, as if it had just been blown out or had been snuffed by fast movement. My hand moved to my dagger. The room was not large, only big enough to house his bed, the small reading nook, and a curtained screen to offer privacy as he washed and used a chamber pot. I stared at the screen. There was no sound coming from behind it. “Hello?”

A prickle of unease slid down my spine as I slowly made my way to the screen and whatever lay hidden beyond. I yanked the curtain back and blew out a frustrated breath.

There, set next to a pitcher and washbasin, was another enchanted skull. My heartbeat quickened as I drew near, waiting, body tensed, to hear its message. It came to life just as I closed the distance with my

final step.

"Come to the Shifting Isles, sister. We have much to discuss about breaking the remainder of our curse. Answers await your arrival. Until then. Stand back."

I didn't think, I leapt aside and the skull exploded into glittering dust, leaving nothing but the chilling message ringing in my ears. I stood there, chest heaving as the impossible became real. My sister was alive.

Vittoria *lived*.

I choked on a mad giggle that bubbled up from my throat. Vittoria could come home. We could go back to Nonna, and our parents. We could cook and laugh and teach our own daughters how to cook in Sea & Vine. Life would resume. We could still have the future we'd dreamed of. Together. And if somehow she couldn't return to the mortal world, I would stay here. No matter what, we would be reunited soon. She'd been here. I'd missed her by minutes, seconds.

Lighthearted relief slowly descended into something darker as my shock wore off. Vittoria had been here, so close, and yet she'd taken Antonio and vanished without seeing me.

She left an enchanted skull with a message. As if she'd been too busy to bother with a simple visit to my chambers. Or wait until I arrived here. Tonight. She had to have sensed me. And she'd still left. As if I didn't matter at all and my shattered heart meant even less.

I'd spent *months* lost in rage and vengeance.

Months of sorrow and fury.

Of mourning.

All the while, my twin was alive. Well. Better than well if her new, powerful magic was any indication. My twin had been enchanting skulls. Leaving them like morbid clues. When all she had to do was sneak into my room. Instead she toyed with me. Tried breaking me.

And she'd almost turned me into a monster.

I inhaled deeply and exhaled. The air like fire in my lungs. Wrath's lessons on controlling my emotions incinerated in the face of my fury. My twin was alive. She'd come for Antonio. And it hadn't been to attack him or make him pay for what he'd done.

On the contrary, he looked as if he'd received a blessing. He called her his *angel*. As in, the angel of death he'd mentioned the night in the monastery. I thought he'd been referencing Wrath or another prince of Hell. If he never killed Vittoria, then that meant he'd never been influenced by a demon prince. I had no proof yet, but I had new suspicions.

Deception. Lies. Betrayal.

All the words I'd associated with the Wicked now belonged to

Vittoria. She'd orchestrated everything—a playwright crafting her own twisted tale, doling out roles for unsuspecting players, myself included. And I was through with being a pawn in her game.

No matter that her end goal was to break the curse, she had no right to lie to me. To keep me in the dark. I was no longer cloaked in shadows. I was burning with rage.

My hands stung. I glanced down, noticing the tiny cuts in my palms where my nails dug in so hard I'd broken the skin. I exhaled, banking the fires of anger at last.

I had a new plan, a new direction. I would gladly pay my beloved sister a visit. And I could not help it if she soon regretted extending her invitation. It was high time Vittoria met the furious, unforgiving witch she'd helped to create.

I turned on my heel and headed for the door. The Shifting Isles beckoned. But there was one final thing that needed to be done before I left House Wrath.

I strode through the corridors, mind whirling with strategies and plans. I no longer cared who had started playing these games. Witches. The Wicked. My twin. And all the cursed and feared creatures in between. If my sister was alive that threw into question the murders that came before and after hers. Were any of the witches *actually* dead, or was it part of some larger conspiracy to accumulate more power or transfer it? I had no idea what else the true "killers" would gain by committing fake murders, unless they were hoping to incite a war between realms, and not simply break the curse.

And a war was something I refused to let happen. Regardless of my twin's scheme, I would protect my family and the mortal world at all costs.

Each step closer to Wrath's chambers brought a greater sense of clarity. My choice was made. And the only regret I had was how long it took me to arrive here.

I kicked in his door and glanced around. The receiving room was empty, the fire banked. Wrath hadn't seen his suite all night. He must have started searching for me shortly after I'd left. Even after I doubted him, doubted the goodness in his heart. His soul. He'd searched for me.

Removing my cloak, I walked toward his bedchamber, grabbed a bottle of demonberry wine from a rack, and continued onto his balcony. He could sense my general whereabouts here through our

tattoo. I had little doubt he'd find me soon enough. I popped the cork and sipped the wine directly from the bottle, staring out at the lake. At this hour the crimson waters looked like a pool of spilled blood. It was an omen of sorts. And for once, I welcomed it.

Glittering black smoke wafted toward me on a breeze as the king of demons prowled closer, his voice a low rumble of thunder at my ear.

"Emilia."

I turned slowly and took him in. Danger lurked in his gaze, along with his namesake sin. He wasn't the only one who was angry, but my wrath was not directed at him; he was the only one who grounded me. I dove into the source of my magic, releasing all of the rage and fury I'd been bottling up since I saw my twin. My power answered my call immediately.

I held up my hands, attention riveted to Wrath's face as a burning flower appeared in each of my palms. There was no flash of surprise. No widening of his eyes or tightening of his mouth. I released my grip on my power, allowing it to burn out. The flowers charred to black, the tiny dying rose-gold embers the only specks of color before the breeze carried the ashes away.

Wrath knew I possessed this talent. This power. And he'd never let on. I wanted to know what else he knew about me, what other secrets I'd yet to uncover about my past.

The Crone told me to solve the mystery of myself. And I intended to do just that.

Perhaps, no matter what Celestia had said in her tower chamber, I really was the First Witch, and this block on my memories was the price I'd paid for using dark magic. That would certainly explain why Nonna warned me away from certain spells.

I gritted my teeth, recalling the way she'd make us bless our amulets during each full moon. Did she know the truth of who I was? She had to. And her betrayal carved deep.

Maybe—unlike what Nonna claimed about our amulets hiding us from the devil—my *cornicello*, his wings, had actually been used to keep *my* power in check, not his. And if that were true, then perhaps Wrath took my amulet not only for his benefit but for mine. My power had definitely shifted since its removal.

I exhaled, focusing on the question I wanted an answer to first.

"How long have you known I can summon fire?" He pressed his lips together. I shook my head, laughing bitterly. "My twin is alive. Though I suspect you already know that, too."

Emotion finally flickered in his eyes, but he remained silent, watchful. On guard. As if I was something to be feared. He wasn't wrong.

"I want answers."

I would not wait for my twin to give me *her* version of the truth when I saw her in the morning. I wanted to gather it myself. Starting now. I looked Wrath over. Once, he'd told me to study my enemies closely. To look for any sign of the truth in their mannerisms. He wasn't speaking. And it was unusual.

"Judging by your silence I imagine this is the curse at play again. We're skirting around things it does not want me to learn." A gleam of approval entered his gaze. Gone in the next instant. "If I accept the marriage bond, I have the strangest feeling some of that will change. The curse may not fully break that way, but I believe there are some bonds more powerful than dark magic. And there is nothing more dangerous than love, is there? People fight for it. They die for it. They commit acts of war and treason and all manner of sin in its name."

I would know. I'd been willing to do dreadful things to avenge my twin.

Something resembling worry flashed in his eyes. "Feelings are not facts."

"Interesting."

My mouth curved seductively. Wrath had just lied. In the closest way he could.

Curse be damned, he still wanted me to wield my power of choice. To accept our bond without outside forces interfering in my free will. The prince of bargains was forfeiting a winning hand. And he was doing it for me. Always for me.

"Tell me about our amulets, your wings. I want to know why Vittoria and I really wore them. Was it to keep our power on a leash, or was it as my family claimed: a way to hide them from you?"

"I have no proof, but I believe both are true. I've also been looking into the possibility that they may have been spelled to ensure you forget certain things."

"You had me wear them in the Crescent Shallows to test that." I inhaled as he nodded in confirmation. At least his expression was one of guilt.

"I'd hoped the truth properties of the shallows would remove any blocks on your mind. I did not anticipate the extreme reaction it caused."

"Do they really lock the gates of Hell?"

"Yes."

Internally I breathed a sigh of relief. At least not *everything* I'd been told was a lie.

"I have one final question for now, your highness." I placed my hand on his chest, feeling the steady thumping beneath my touch. His attention dropped to that tiny connection before he dragged it back to

mine. “Pretend there’s no curse. No magical betrothal. Or romantic urges created by our bond. Would you choose me? To reign beside you. To be your queen. Your friend. Your confidant. Your lover.”

“Emilia…”

“You tricked me into a blood bargain with you before I crossed into the underworld. Do you recall what you said?” I swore his heart stuttered a beat before furiously picking up its pace. “You told me to never make a bargain with the devil. ‘What’s his is his.’”

“It was a figure of speech. A blood bargain does not equate possession.”

“Perhaps not technically.” My hand fell away and I stepped back. “You did it as another means of protecting me. In case I didn’t want to accept our bond. You claimed no other prince of Hell would be stupid enough to challenge you. It was your secret way of offering me a way out of any contract with another demon House. The blood pact I made with Pride included. Am I wrong?”

“No.”

“Don’t answer now, but I want to know if what you said then stands.”

“You’ll have to be more specific. I said a great many things.”

“If I am still yours.”

He stilled. My words hung between us, heavy and lingering. Like his gaze.

“If I am, I would tell you that you are mine. That I am choosing you as my husband. There is no one I’d rather confront my demons with, no soul I’d travel through Hell with. And no one else I want standing beside me when I go to the Shifting Isles tomorrow.”

He was quiet for a long moment, seeming to gauge my sincerity and weigh it against his own feelings. “And if I don’t require time to think it over?”

Thank the goddess.

I exhaled quietly and moved from the balcony into his bedchamber, tugging the strings of my tunic loose as I passed by him. I glanced over my shoulder, noting with satisfaction the desire darkening his gaze as I slipped the shirt from my body and let it drop to the floor.

“Then I suggest coming to bed, your majesty.”

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Kerri Maniscalco grew up in a semi-haunted house outside New York City, where her fascination with gothic settings began. In her spare time she reads everything she can get her hands on, cooks all kinds of food with her family and friends, and drinks entirely too much tea while discussing life's finer points with her cats. She is the #1 *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Stalking Jack the Ripper quartet and Kingdom of the Wicked series. She's always excited to share early snippets and teasers on Instagram @KerriManiscalco. For news and updates, she invites you to check out kerrimaniscalco.com.

Turn the page for a sneak preview at the thrilling finale to the Kingdom of the Wicked series

TWENTY YEARS BEFORE

Coven elders seldom agreed on anything, save for two matters considered to be their highest of laws: The devil should never be summoned. And, under no circumstance, were black mirrors ever to be used for scrying.

As one of the best seers on the island, Sofia Santorini believed some rules were meant to be broken, especially when her newest visions kept whispering troubling tales in her ear. It was those insistent murmurs about the dangerous prophecy connected to their curse that finally convinced Sofia to steal the first book of spells: the only grimoire that outlined how to scry with dark magic. The fate of the coven might very well depend on her actions, sanctioned or not.

Though, at the last meeting, the council hadn't sounded *quite* so grim. They didn't need to. Sofia had sensed the shift of magic the way birds felt the turning of the season, listening to that innate warning to fly away, to survive. A violent storm was gathering on the horizon. She had no wings, and even if she did, Sofia refused to flee without her family.

Breaking two rules to potentially save dozens of witches seemed like the right thing to do. Any information Sofia could gather about the curse before either the Wicked or the Feared took their revenge would only benefit their coven. Surely the elders would understand.

Placing the black mirror on the floor in Death's temple along with the foil-stamped spell book, she gathered her skirts and knelt before the objects. A shudder went through her that had nothing to do with the cold stone seeping through her thin muslin layers. She stared into the forbidden mirror, its inky surface reminding her of the still waters of a lake she'd once visited to collect freshwater stones for her spells.

Except this surface didn't have any soothing moonlight shining overhead, blessing her path. In fact, it seemed to devour any light that dared to touch it. Any manner of demon might be lurking below the unknown depths, waiting to strike.

She exhaled the fear away. It was time to do what she'd come to do, then go home to her family. Removing the slim dagger from her skirt pocket, she held the point to her fingertip and pressed until a bead of blood welled up, red as the devil's eyes.

Rising back to her feet, Sofia walked to the altar in the center of the room. One didn't perform magic in a goddess's temple without first paying tribute.

On either side of the altar, fire crackled in the offering bowls she'd lit earlier, the tendrils of smoke curling through the air, as if beckoning her to step into the underworld. She swore she felt eyes on her, watching from the shadows, waiting to see if she was bold enough to cross that forbidden boundary. Sofia's gaze swept around the quiet chamber, falling on the two human skulls she'd stolen from the monastery. Dark days called for even darker deeds. She'd not falter now.

Holding her pricked finger over the first of the two offering bowls, she watched blood droplets sizzle then steam as they met the flames. Sofia quickly moved to the other side of the altar and repeated the gesture with the second bowl.

Satisfied she'd paid enough for the goddess to grant protection, she turned and retrieved the skulls, ignoring the bloody fingerprint she left on the bone. Kneeling once again, skulls placed on the north and south points of the mirror, she opened the spell book and began chanting.

For a few tense beats, the mirror remained unchanged. Then smoke started swirling within its surface. Slowly at first, then picking up speed like the hell winds she'd heard gusted through some demon circles, confusing the poor souls unlucky enough to find themselves there.

"Goddess, protect me."

Sofia leaned closer to the mirror, anxious to learn all she could about their enemies. Any information might prove valuable, especially since all their memories were slowly being consumed by the curse with each passing full moon. While she stared at the mirror, a window to the underworld cracked open, giving Sofia her first glimpse of the demon realm.

"Show me how to break our curse."

The mirror pulsed as if the magic acknowledged her request and agreed to grant her wish. In place of the smoke, strange images began flickering over the darkened glass, and Sofia quickly realized she was

being shown a story through a series of still pictures. She let out a quiet breath. Thus far, despite the forbidden magic she'd used, it was similar to her usual visions.

The magic propelled the images to leave the mirror and swirl around her as if she were standing there the moment they happened. She saw a dark throne room, a furious demon.

Bits and pieces of the familiar appeared, but the magic must not have been working properly. Certain images weren't aligning with their history or what Sofia knew of the prophecy. She watched as a witch, who must be the First Witch, cursed that demon. Her vengeance and hate were so powerful Sofia could practically *feel* it through the illusion.

Next she saw a strange well with crystals— memory stones, thousands of them. The scene abruptly shifted again, this time to a small cottage overlooking the sea. A young witch— one she knew well — gripped a memory stone in one hand and a dagger in the other. The First Witch had been there, too, handing the witch the stone that would take away whatever she wished to forget. The images faded, needing more magic to fuel them.

"Wait!" Sofia cried out.

Desperate to learn more, she gripped the skull resting on the south point and whispered a spell that made it shatter, scattering bone shards across the dark surface, hoping the mirror would use them to fuel more images.

And it did. Except once more they weren't quite what she'd expected. Sophia saw her island, then flickers of other unfamiliar cities and times bleeding in and taking over. The images had to be wrong.

Yet… if they weren't, then everything the coven elders had told them had been a lie. Including where they were from.

It was so preposterous; there was no way that could be true. Determined to figure out the mystery, she reached for the last skull. This one had rubies in its eyes, an added gift for the goddess who ruled over the dead. Sofia shattered the skull and was immediately thrust into another time, one where that same young witch from earlier appeared to be… a rough hand came down on Sophia's shoulder, shaking her from the vision.

Heart thundering, Sofia blinked until Death's temple came back into focus. Fearful of what— or who— had torn her from the vision, she snatched her dagger and shot to her feet, her attention landing on the person who'd interrupted. The robed figure tossed back the hood on her cloak, revealing a familiar, stern face.

Sofia's shoulders slumped forward as she lowered the blade. For one frightening moment, she thought she'd summoned an enemy.

“Thank the goddess it’s you. I’ve learned something incredible about our curse and our city. I know who the First Witch’s daughter is, at least I think I do. You’ll never believe this discovery.”

Sofia was too full of dark magic, too shaken by the truth she’d learned, to notice the dangerous gleam entering the other witch’s eyes. “Neither will you.”

“I don’t understand—”

With a flick of her wrist and a harsh curse, the witch cast a spell that knocked Sofia backward. Her skull cracked against the altar, causing her to see a bright flash of stars that left her momentarily stunned. Before she could gather her wits and utter a protection spell of her own, Sofia’s mind fragmented just like the mirror the other witch stomped on, destroying the truth still playing across its dark surface.

Sofia opened her mouth to scream but found herself unable to do more than speak in tongues. Soon all she could see were those strange images the mirror had shown her.

If she’d been about to call for help again, Sofia couldn’t remember why.

She stared, not truly seeing, as the other witch retrieved the first book of spells and slowly made her way through the temple, never once glancing back at her friend. All the while Sofia quietly repeated one phrase, a chant, a benediction, a plea.

Or perhaps it was the key to unlocking everything…

“As above, so below.”

ONE

All at once, candles flared to life around the Prince of Wrath's bedchamber.

Despite my best efforts to not grin at the demon, my traitorous lips curved upward on their own. Tracking the small action from where he stood on the balcony, the prince's attention moved to my mouth and remained there a beat longer than necessary.

His heated stare coaxed a different kind of warmth to spread over me just as gold- tipped flames erupted in the fireplace, sizzling and crackling like mad.

It was a welcome feeling, especially after the coldness that had swept in earlier and settled in my bones. Seeing my sister in the Triple Moon Mirror broke something vital in me.

Something I refused to examine at the moment.

Lingering near Wrath's bed, tunic now discarded at my feet, I knew it wasn't his namesake sin that had the fires blazing in his private chamber. It was the desire he was struggling to control; the passion I'd ignited when I chose him— knowing *exactly* who he was— and still agreed to become his wicked queen. Since he'd already stolen my soul, I was now offering him my body. Without games or magical bonds urging us together. Without focusing on Vittoria and the way my heart ached each time I thought of my twin's deception.

My eyes prickled with unshed tears just thinking of my sister now, and I tried desperately to rein in my emotions. Wrath would sense my hurt, and it was a conversation I didn't wish to have. That sorrow could wait until I met my twin on the mysterious Shifting Isles tomorrow and heard what she had to say.

Until then, I didn't want to spend another minute wondering why

she'd faked her death. Or how she could hurt me so horribly for so long. I'd already given Vittoria months of my tears and fury while on my path to avenge her.

Tonight I simply wanted Wrath. Samael. King of demons. Most feared of the seven immortal princes of Hell. General of War and the literal devil. Temptation and sin made flesh. A nightmare to some, but to me he currently looked like a dream. And if the cursed demon didn't crawl between the sheets with me this instant, I'd unleash a bit of hell myself.

"Are you going to stand out there all night, your majesty?" I arched a brow, but Wrath's solitary response was a slight narrowing of his golden-eyed gaze. Stubborn, untrusting creature. Only he would question why I stood in a state of undress before his bed and not simply unleash his baser, carnal urges like I desired. "If you require further proof of my decision…"

"Emilia."

The way he said only my name made me brace myself for disappointment. His tone indicated we needed to talk, and talking was the absolute worst thing I could imagine right now. Talking would lead to tears, and that would force me to confront just how deeply seeing Vittoria earlier had affected me. I'd much rather lose myself in Wrath's addictive kisses.

"Please don't," I said, quietly. "I'm fine. Truly."

The demon looked apprehensive, unconvinced. He'd once told me to want but never need, but tonight I felt both strongly, and I didn't care if that made me weak. I prayed he wouldn't send me to my own bedroom suite alone. I couldn't bear the solitude. I needed comfort, a connection. Some bit of peace only he could give me right now.

Just then, the sheer curtains separating his bedchamber from the balcony fluttered in the wintry breeze, enticing him to join his half-naked queen. It was as if the realm itself wanted us to finally be united. With softly flickering candles and midnight fabrics, the bedchamber exuded quiet sensuality. It was a room made for all sorts of whispers: the ones where words were spoken tenderly, reverently against lips, and the whispers of clothing sliding slowly over skin.

Two things I wished to experience with this prince at once.

By his own admission, Wrath believed in the power of actions over words. And with that reminder, I made my move. He remained motionless outside, watching me bend over and shuck off my boots. I couldn't tell if he'd picked up on my emotions about Vittoria and misinterpreted them or if he still didn't trust that I wanted to complete the next step in accepting our marriage.

Sleeping together was one of the two final acts needed for us to become husband and wife. We could certainly have sex and not be

married, but I *wanted* to complete our bond.

Given how we'd first met— my summoning of him in Palermo, then accidentally binding him to me for eternity— and how we'd both vowed to hate each other and never so much as kiss, I understood if that was the source of his trepidation.

Several months ago, I would have claimed tonight an improbability, too. That was before I acknowledged there was more to our story. That I burned for him as fiercely as the fiery rose-gold flowers I could now summon from my fingertips at will. Another thing I would have thought impossible, and one more mystery for me to solve along with the truth of who I actually was. But all that could wait. The only thing I wanted to think of now was claiming my demon king.

Snowflakes started falling around him, lightly dusting his dark hair and broad shoulders, yet he didn't appear to notice. The harsh elements of this winter realm never seemed to bother him, though that was probably because he was a force of nature to be reckoned with himself.

I held his intense gaze as I shimmied the tight breeches over my hips and stepped out of them, tossing them on top of the tunic. Wrath's breathing all but stopped when he noticed I hadn't been wearing undergarments. Fists clenched at his sides, his knuckles went bone white from the strain. Not exactly the reaction I'd hoped for upon disrobing.

Brow furrowed, I silently replayed our exchange, carefully recalling each word. After tricking me into a blood bargain with him — to ensure none of his brothers took advantage of me when I first crossed into the underworld— I'd asked if he still considered me his.

Now, while rigidly standing outside in the snow, not making a move to follow me into his very warm and inviting bedchamber, I worried I'd misunderstood him. He'd said only that he didn't require time to think it over. Which, technically, didn't mean he considered me *his*.

"Have you changed your mind?" I asked.

Wrath scanned my face, his own expression closed off. "You willingly choose me. Knowing who I am. What I'm capable of."

They weren't questions, but I nodded in affirmation. "Yes."

"And this decision has nothing to do with your sister?"

He watched me carefully, and I knew he was trying to sense even the slightest shift in my emotions. Wrath would not take me to his bed if he believed any force aside from my own desire was driving me there. For one of the first times since we'd met, I offered him nothing but truth. If we had any hope of moving forward together, the games between us needed to end.

“I wanted you that night at Gluttony’s party. And before that… do you remember when you magically removed the intoxication from me while we trained against his sin? I wanted you to take me then, too. Those times were both well before I saw Vittoria.” I forced myself to hold his gaze, to prove to him how serious I was. “And I realized tonight that throughout everything, you’ve always been there for me. Your methods might not have always been ideal by mortal standards, but everything you’ve done has been to help me. I want *you*, and it has nothing to do with anyone else.”

After a long pause that had me tensing for rejection, he finally prowled from the balcony into his bedchamber, slowly closing the distance between us. His attention meandered from my eyes to my lips before it dipped lower to take in my body.

A knee-clenching savagery entered his gaze while he mentally devoured me inch by brutal inch, pausing on that throbbing place between my thighs that suddenly ached for him. A low growl rumbled in his chest, confirming he sensed my desire.

I sincerely hoped he allowed whatever beast *that* was to break free tonight. I wanted to experience every wicked and deviant thing he’d just dreamed up.

He flashed a grin born of sinful promise, indicating he was more than willing to deliver.

Even with the chill clinging to him from the storm, I felt anything but cold as he neared. Between his scorching stare and the way he silently traced each of my curves as if plotting all the things he was about to do… it was almost enough to melt me right then and there.

“Tell me every dark desire, Emilia”— he tilted my face up—“every fantasy you wish to come true.” His fingers lightly stroked the pulse point at my throat before he brought his mouth to mine, the kiss a mere brush of his lips that left me breathless and wanting. He pulled back and slowly ran his hands down my silhouette. “And I vow to make every one of them happen.”

My focus roved over the expanse of fine clothes and the hard body hidden underneath them. “I have quite a few ideas.”

The new look he gave me indicated he had some interesting ideas of his own.

We might argue elsewhere, but in this we were blessedly united. I pulled him in for another kiss, wanting to cherish this moment for eternity. Soon the sweet kiss turned ravenous, neither one of us content with being slow or delicate anymore. We were beings fueled by rage, by passion. And I wanted our first joining to be as explosive as our tempers.

If Wrath wished to give me every dark desire I’d ever had, I hoped he was prepared to keep up. I nipped his lower lip, and with a growl

of approval, he responded in kind.

Wrath quickly deemed war on my mouth and battled like the general he was, taking no prisoners. There was ownership in this kiss, possession. And I gave it right back. He was *mine*. Every inch of his wicked soul, every steady thump of his heart, belonged to me.

His hands caressed my body, and a honeyed heat pooled low in my belly, spreading with each glorious pass of his calloused fingers. Of all the times for him to be fully dressed…

I yanked his suit jacket off, then tugged at the edge of his shirt before ripping it apart, needing to see him, *feel* him, skin to skin.

He broke away from our kiss, his mouth lifting in amusement. "Boring as virtues normally are, patience might prove worthwhile right now."

"In this instance, I hoped you were more skilled with sin. If I recall, you once asked if I'd like to see how very wicked you could be." I ran my attention over him, hiding my smile as his eyes flashed. "Is this truly your best?"

"Are you challenging me?"

I lifted a shoulder, knowing exactly what I was doing and enjoying the reaction it sparked in him. Given the bulge in his trousers, he didn't appear to mind, either. Twisted demon. "And if I am, what will you do then?" I asked.

"Get on the bed, my lady."

His voice was soft, but there was nothing meek in the command. I boldly stepped backward until I reached the bed and leaned against it, fingers sinking into the ebony throw placed tastefully on its edge. Once, I'd imagined what the fur would feel like on my bare skin.

I was about to find out.

Wrath jerked his chin, indicating he wanted me *all* the way on the bed, not simply perched against it. Heart thumping in anticipation, I lifted myself up and slid across the oversized mattress, biting back a moan as the soft fur quickly gave way to his cool silk sheets. It felt better than I'd imagined. Luxury and decadence mixed with something a bit wild and untamable.

Much like the master of this House of Sin.

Wrath unbuttoned his trousers, his gaze locked onto mine. A challenge in its own right to see if I was truly ready for what was to come. His pants hit the ground, and his hard length sprang free, intimidating and tantalizing, and just as eager to claim me.

I bit my lower lip, nearly overcome with want as I drank him in. Goddess above he was glorious. My attention slowly moved from his proud arousal and traveled along the rest of his body. Over six feet of pure muscle with bronze skin that seemed to glow with vitality filled my vision. He was a study of masculine power crossed with rugged

beauty.

He stepped forward, and my focus shifted from the metallic snake inked onto his arm to the tattoo on his left thigh— a downwardfacing dagger with roses etched onto its surface.

I couldn't quite make out the geometric designs on its hilt, and as Wrath took himself in his tattooed hand and slowly pumped his fist, my mind emptied. The demon gave me a smug look, like he knew exactly what his seductive taunting was doing. *Goddess curse him.* I wanted to replace his hand with my own. Better yet, I wanted to use my…

… A violent crack split the air like an angry god's whip, and Wrath's bedchamber— along with the demon who owned it— vanished, replaced by an empty, cold room without any light.

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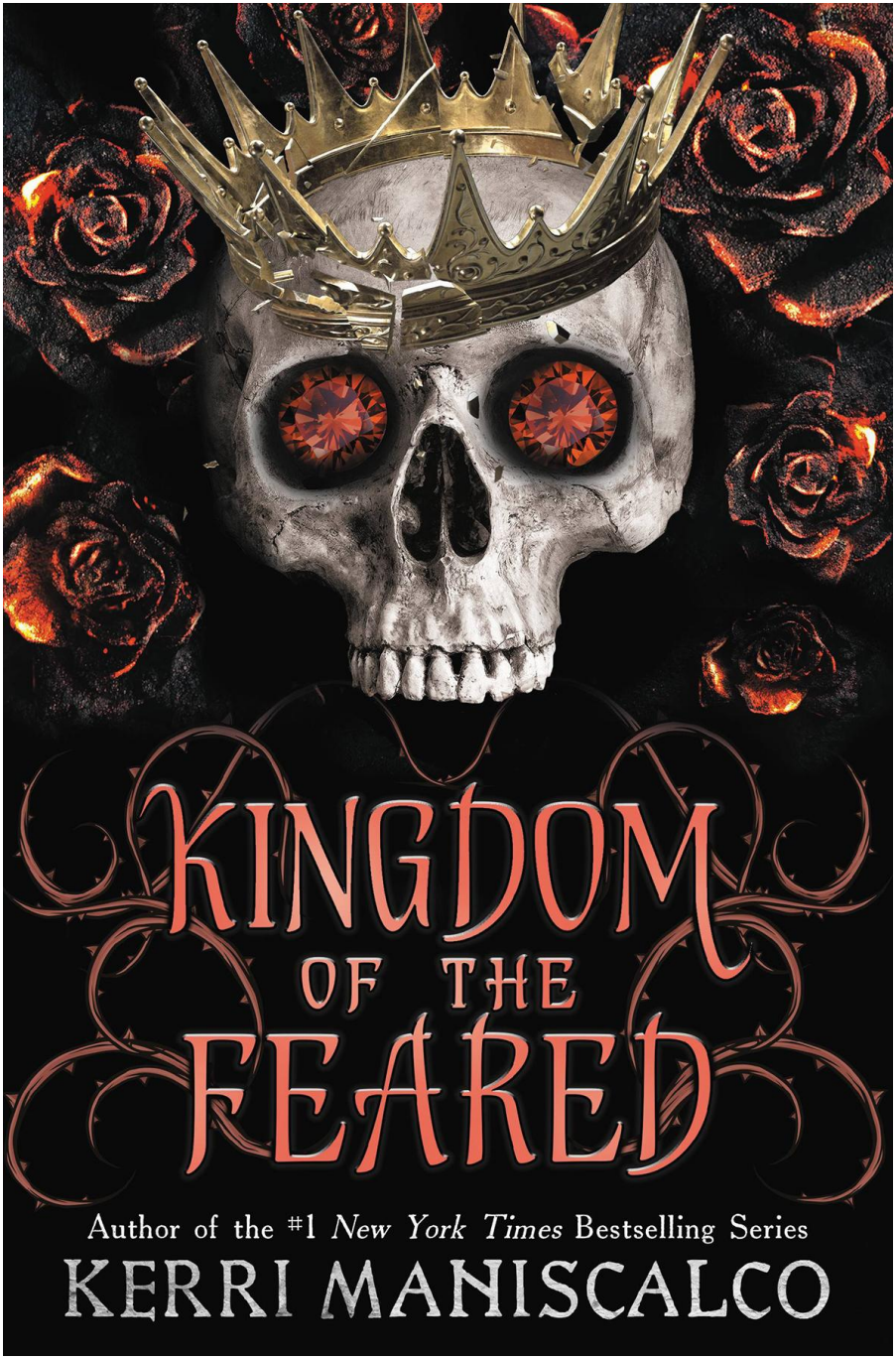
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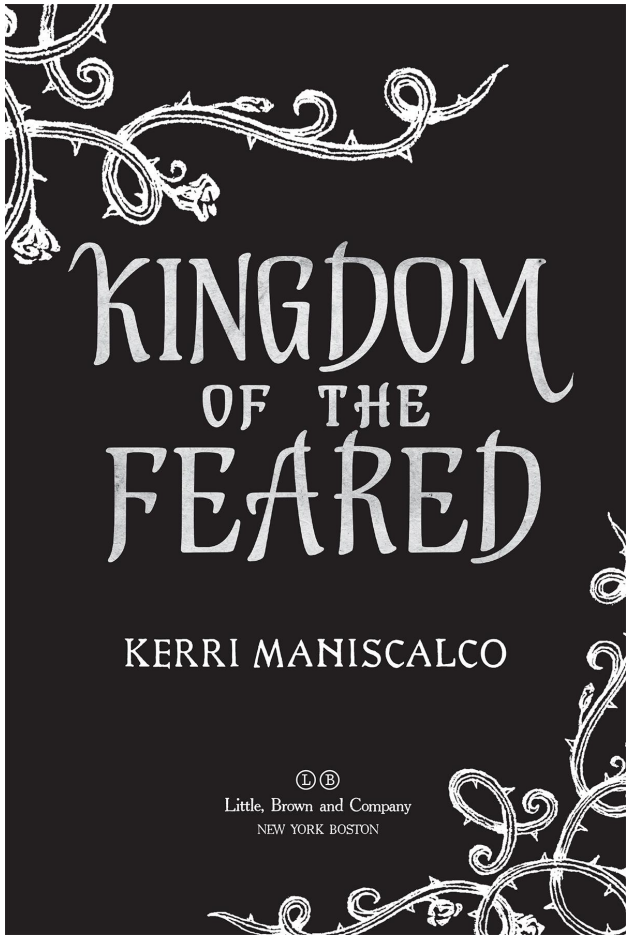
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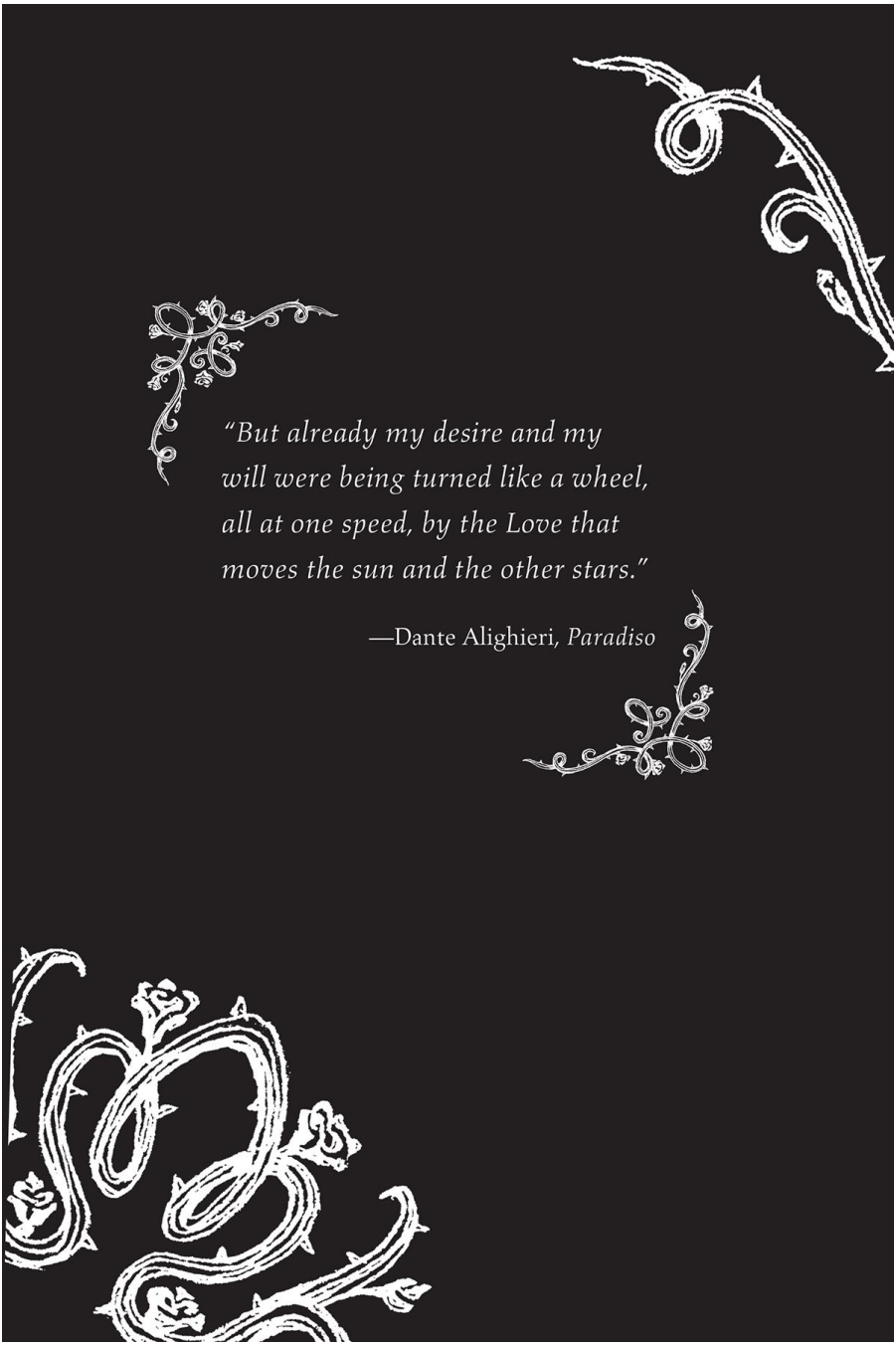

"But already my desire and my will were being turned like a wheel, all at one speed, by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars."

—Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*

Once, the Prophecy of the Feared was thought a myth, a story of divine vengeance passed down through the centuries. It served as a warning of the chaos and destruction that Death and Fury could bring if unleashed. A tale two enemies should have recalled well before they cursed each other in a fit of rage. On that fateful night, two powerful magics converged, binding each party from uttering—or sometimes even remembering—the full truth. The curses had even greater consequences none had predicted. For years, demons and witches tensely awaited the day when all would finally be revealed. When that midnight hour arrives, it's advised to stock the home with ambrosia and nectar and pray to the goddess for mercy.

—Notes from the secret di Carlo grimoire

TWENTY YEARS BEFORE

Coven elders seldom agreed on anything, save for two matters considered to be their highest of laws: The devil should never be summoned. And, under no circumstance, were black mirrors ever to be used for scrying.

As one of the best seers on the island, Sofia Santorini believed some rules were meant to be broken, especially when her newest visions kept whispering troubling tales in her ear. It was those insistent murmurs about the dangerous prophecy connected to their curse that finally convinced Sofia to steal the first book of spells: the only grimoire that outlined how to scry with dark magic. The fate of the coven might very well depend on her actions, sanctioned or not.

Though, at the last meeting, the council hadn't sounded *quite* so grim. They didn't need to. Sofia had sensed the shift of magic the way birds felt the turning of the season, listening to that innate warning to fly away, to survive. A violent storm was gathering on the horizon. She had no wings, and even if she did, Sofia refused to flee without her family.

Breaking two rules to potentially save dozens of witches seemed like the right thing to do. Any information Sofia could gather about the curse before either the Wicked or the Feared took their revenge would only benefit their coven. Surely the elders would understand.

Placing the black mirror on the floor in Death's temple along with the foil-stamped spell book, she gathered her skirts and knelt before the objects. A shudder went through her that had nothing to do with the cold stone seeping through her thin muslin layers. She stared into the forbidden mirror, its inky surface reminding her of the still waters of a lake she'd once visited to collect freshwater stones for her spells.

Except this surface didn't have any soothing moonlight shining

overhead, blessing her path. In fact, it seemed to devour any light that dared to touch it. Any manner of demon might be lurking below the unknown depths, waiting to strike.

She exhaled the fear away. It was time to do what she'd come to do, then go home to her family. Removing the slim dagger from her skirt pocket, she held the point to her fingertip and pressed until a bead of blood welled up, red as the devil's eyes.

Rising back to her feet, Sofia walked to the altar in the center of the room. One didn't perform magic in a goddess's temple without first paying tribute.

On either side of the altar, fire crackled in the offering bowls she'd lit earlier, the tendrils of smoke curling through the air, as if beckoning her to step into the underworld. She swore she felt eyes on her, watching from the shadows, waiting to see if she was bold enough to cross that forbidden boundary. Sofia's gaze swept around the quiet chamber, falling on the two human skulls she'd stolen from the monastery. Dark days called for even darker deeds. She'd not falter now.

Holding her pricked finger over the first of the two offering bowls, she watched blood droplets sizzle then steam as they met the flames. Sofia quickly moved to the other side of the altar and repeated the gesture with the second bowl.

Satisfied she'd paid enough for the goddess to grant protection, she turned and retrieved the skulls, ignoring the bloody fingerprint she left on the bone. Kneeling once again, skulls placed on the north and south points of the mirror, she opened the spell book and began chanting.

For a few tense beats, the mirror remained unchanged. Then smoke started swirling within its surface. Slowly at first, then picking up speed like the hell winds she'd heard gusted through some demon circles, confusing the poor souls unlucky enough to find themselves there.

"Goddess, protect me."

Sofia leaned closer to the mirror, anxious to learn all she could about their enemies. Any information might prove valuable, especially since all their memories were slowly being consumed by the curse with each passing full moon. While she stared at the mirror, a window to the underworld cracked open, giving Sofia her first glimpse of the demon realm.

"Show me how to break our curse."

The mirror pulsed as if the magic acknowledged her request and agreed to grant her wish. In place of the smoke, strange images began flickering over the darkened glass, and Sofia quickly realized she was being shown a story through a series of still pictures. She let out a

quiet breath. Thus far, despite the forbidden magic she'd used, it was similar to her usual visions.

The magic propelled the images to leave the mirror and swirl around her as if she were standing there the moment they happened. She saw a dark throne room, a furious demon.

Bits and pieces of the familiar appeared, but the magic must not have been working. Certain images weren't aligning with their history or what Sofia knew of the prophecy. She watched as a witch, who must be the First Witch, cursed that demon. Her vengeance and hate were so powerful Sofia could practically *feel* it through the illusion.

Next she saw a strange well with crystals—memory stones, thousands of them. The scene abruptly shifted again, this time to a small cottage overlooking the sea. A young witch—one she knew well—gripped a memory stone in one hand and a dagger in the other. The First Witch had been there, too, handing the witch the stone that would take away whatever she wished to forget. The images faded, needing more magic to fuel them.

"Wait!" Sofia cried out. Desperate to learn more, she gripped the skull resting on the south point and whispered a spell that made it shatter, scattering bone shards across the dark surface, hoping the mirror would use them to fuel more images. And it did. Except once more they weren't quite what she'd expected. Sophia saw her island, then flickers of other unfamiliar cities and times bleeding in and taking over. The images had to be wrong. Yet… if they weren't, then everything the coven elders had told them had been a lie. Including where they were from.

It was so preposterous; there was no way that could be true. Determined to figure out the mystery, she reached for the last skull. This one had rubies in its eyes, an added gift for the goddess who ruled over the dead. Sofia shattered the skull and was immediately thrust into another time, one where that same young witch from earlier appeared to be… a rough hand came down on Sophia's shoulder, shaking her from the vision. Heart thundering, Sofia blinked until Death's temple came back into focus. Fearful of what—or who—had torn her from the vision, she snatched her dagger and shot to her feet, her attention landing on the person who'd interrupted. The robed figure tossed back the hood on her cloak, revealing a familiar, stern face.

Sofia's shoulders slumped forward as she lowered the blade. For one frightening moment, she thought she'd summoned an enemy. "Thank the goddess it's you. I've learned something incredible about our curse and our city. I know who the First Witch's daughter is, at least I think I do. You'll never believe this discovery."

Sofia was too full of dark magic, too shaken by the truth she'd

learned, to notice the dangerous gleam entering the other witch's eyes. "Neither will you."

"I don't understand—"

With a flick of her wrist and a harsh curse, the witch cast a spell that knocked Sofia backward. Her skull cracked against the altar, causing her to see a bright flash of stars that left her momentarily stunned. Before she could gather her wits and utter a protection spell of her own, Sofia's mind fragmented just like the mirror the other witch stomped on, destroying the truth still playing across its dark surface.

Sofia opened her mouth to scream but found herself unable to do more than speak in tongues. Soon all she could see were those strange images the mirror had shown her.

If she'd been about to call for help again, Sofia couldn't remember why.

She stared, not truly seeing, as the other witch retrieved the first book of spells and slowly made her way through the temple, never once glancing back at her friend. All the while Sofia quietly repeated one phrase, a chant, a benediction, a plea.

Or perhaps it was the key to unlocking everything…

"As above, so below."

ONE

All at once, candles flared to life around the Prince of Wrath's bedchamber.

Despite my best efforts to not grin at the demon, my traitorous lips curved upward on their own. Tracking the small action from where he stood on the balcony, the prince's attention moved to my mouth and remained there a beat longer than necessary.

His heated stare coaxed a different kind of warmth to spread over me just as gold-tipped flames erupted in the fireplace, sizzling and crackling like mad.

It was a welcome feeling, especially after the coldness that had swept in earlier and settled in my bones. Seeing my sister in the Triple Moon Mirror broke something vital in me.

Something I refused to examine at the moment.

Lingering near Wrath's bed, tunic now discarded at my feet, I knew it wasn't his namesake sin that had the fires blazing in his private chamber. It was the desire he was struggling to control; the passion I'd ignited when I chose him—knowing *exactly* who he was—and still agreed to become his wicked queen. Since he'd already stolen my soul, I was now offering him my body. Without games or magical bonds urging us together. Without focusing on Vittoria and the way my heart ached each time I thought of my twin's deception.

My eyes prickled with unshed tears just thinking of my sister now, and I tried desperately to rein in my emotions. Wrath would sense my hurt, and it was a conversation I didn't wish to have. That sorrow could wait until I met my twin on the mysterious Shifting Isles tomorrow and heard what she had to say. Until then, I didn't want to spend another minute wondering why she'd faked her death. Or how she could hurt me so horribly for so long. I'd already given Vittoria

months of my tears and fury while on my path to avenge her.

Tonight I simply wanted Wrath. Samael. King of demons. Most feared of the seven immortal princes of Hell. General of War and the literal devil. Temptation and sin made flesh. A nightmare to some, but to me he currently looked like a dream. And if the cursed demon didn't crawl between the sheets with me this instant, I'd unleash a bit of hell myself.

"Are you going to stand out there all night, your majesty?" I arched a brow, but Wrath's solitary response was a slight narrowing of his golden-eyed gaze. Stubborn, untrusting creature. Only he would question why I stood in a state of undress before his bed and not simply unleash his baser, carnal urges like I desired. "If you require further proof of my decision…"

"Emilia."

The way he said only my name made me brace myself for disappointment. His tone indicated we needed to talk, and talking was the absolute worst thing I could imagine right now. Talking would lead to tears, and that would force me to confront just how deeply seeing Vittoria earlier had affected me. I'd much rather lose myself in Wrath's addictive kisses.

"Please don't," I said, quietly. "I'm fine. Truly."

The demon looked apprehensive, unconvinced. He'd once told me to want but never need, but tonight I felt both strongly, and I didn't care if that made me weak. I prayed he wouldn't send me to my own bedroom suite alone. I couldn't bear the solitude. I needed comfort, a connection. Some bit of peace only he could give me right now.

Just then, the sheer curtains separating his bedchamber from the balcony fluttered in the wintry breeze, enticing him to join his half-naked queen. It was as if the realm itself wanted us to finally be united. With softly flickering candles and midnight fabrics, the bedchamber exuded quiet sensuality. It was a room made for all sorts of whispers: the ones where words were spoken tenderly, reverently against lips, and the whispers of clothing sliding slowly over skin.

Two things I wished to experience with this prince at once.

By his own admission, Wrath believed in the power of actions over words. And with that reminder, I made my move. He remained motionless outside, watching me bend over and shuck off my boots. I couldn't tell if he'd picked up on my emotions about Vittoria and misinterpreted them or if he still didn't trust that I wanted to complete the next step in accepting our marriage. Sleeping together was one of the two final acts needed for us to become husband and wife. We could certainly have sex and not be married, but I *wanted* to complete our bond.

Given how we'd first met—my summoning of him in Palermo,

then accidentally binding him to me for eternity—and how we'd both vowed to hate each other and never so much as kiss, I understood if that was the source of his trepidation.

Several months ago, I would have claimed tonight an improbability, too. That was before I acknowledged there was more to our story. That I burned for him as fiercely as the fiery rose-gold flowers I could summon from my fingertips at will. Another thing I would have thought impossible, and one more mystery for me to solve along with the truth of who I actually was. But all that could wait. The only thing I wanted to think of now was claiming my demon king.

Snowflakes started falling around him, lightly dusting his dark hair and broad shoulders, yet he didn't appear to notice. The harsh elements of this winter realm never seemed to bother him, though that was probably because he was a force of nature to be reckoned with himself.

I held his intense gaze as I shimmied the tight breeches over my hips and stepped out of them, tossing them on top of the tunic. Wrath's breathing all but stopped when he noticed I hadn't been wearing undergarments. Fists clenched at his sides, his knuckles went bone white from the strain. Not exactly the reaction I'd hoped for upon disrobing.

Brow furrowed, I silently replayed our exchange, carefully recalling each word. After tricking me into a blood bargain with him —to ensure none of his brothers took advantage of me when I first crossed into the underworld—I'd asked if he still considered me his.

Now, while rigidly standing outside in the snow, not making a move to follow me into his very warm and inviting bedchamber, I worried I'd misunderstood him. He'd said only that he didn't require time to think it over. Which, technically, didn't mean he considered me *his*.

"Have you changed your mind?" I asked.

Wrath scanned my face, his own expression closed off. "You willingly choose me. Knowing who I am. What I'm capable of."

They weren't questions, but I nodded in affirmation. "Yes."

"And this decision has nothing to do with your sister?"

He watched me carefully, and I knew he was trying to sense even the slightest shift in my emotions. Wrath would not take me to his bed if he believed any force aside from my own desire was driving me there. For one of the first times since we'd met, I offered him nothing but truth. If we had any hope of moving forward together, the games between us needed to end.

"I wanted you that night at Gluttony's party. And before that… do you remember when you magically removed the intoxication from me while we trained against his sin? I wanted you to take me then, too.

Those times were both well before I saw Vittoria." I forced myself to hold his gaze, to prove to him how serious I was. "And I realized tonight that throughout everything, you've always been there for me. Your methods might not have always been ideal by mortal standards, but everything you've done has been to help me. I want *you*, and it has nothing to do with anyone else."

After a long pause that had me tensing for rejection, he finally prowled from the balcony into his bedchamber, slowly closing the distance between us. His attention meandered from my eyes to my lips before it dipped lower to take in my body.

A knee-clenching savagery entered his gaze while he mentally devoured me inch by brutal inch, pausing on that throbbing place between my thighs that suddenly ached for him. A low growl rumbled in his chest, confirming he sensed my desire.

I sincerely hoped he allowed whatever beast *that* was to break free tonight. I wanted to experience every wicked and deviant thing he'd just dreamed up.

He flashed a grin born of sinful promise, indicating he was more than willing to deliver.

Even with the chill clinging to him from the storm, I felt anything but cold as he neared. Between his scorching stare and the way he silently traced each of my curves as if plotting all the things he was about to do… it was almost enough to melt me right then and there.

"Tell me every dark desire, Emilia"—he tilted my face up—"every fantasy you wish to come true." His fingers lightly stroked the pulse point at my throat before he brought his mouth to mine, the kiss a mere brush of his lips that left me breathless and wanting. He pulled back and slowly ran his hands down my silhouette. "And I vow to make every one of them happen."

My focus roved over the expanse of fine clothes and the hard body hidden underneath them. "I have quite a few ideas."

The new look he gave me indicated he had some interesting ideas of his own.

We might argue elsewhere, but in this we were blessedly united. I pulled him in for another kiss, wanting to cherish this moment for eternity. Soon the sweet kiss turned ravenous, neither one of us content with being slow or delicate anymore. We were beings fueled by rage, by passion. And I wanted our first joining to be as explosive as our tempers.

If Wrath wished to give me every dark desire I'd ever had, I hoped he was prepared to keep up. I nipped his lower lip, and with a growl of approval, he responded in kind.

Wrath quickly deemed war on my mouth and battled like the general he was, taking no prisoners. There was ownership in this kiss,

possession. And I gave it right back. He was *mine*. Every inch of his wicked soul, every steady thump of his heart, belonged to me.

His hands caressed my body, and a honeyed heat pooled low in my belly, spreading with each glorious pass of his calloused fingers. Of all the times for him to be fully dressed…

I yanked his suit jacket off, then tugged at the edge of his shirt before ripping it apart, needing to see him, *feel* him, skin to skin.

He broke away from our kiss, his mouth lifting in amusement. "Boring as virtues normally are, patience might prove worthwhile right now."

"In this instance, I hoped you were more skilled with sin. If I recall, you once asked if I'd like to see how very wicked you could be." I ran my attention over him, hiding my smile as his eyes flashed. "Is this truly your best?"

"Are you challenging me?"

I lifted a shoulder, knowing exactly what I was doing and enjoying the reaction it sparked in him. Given the bulge in his trousers, he didn't appear to mind, either. Twisted demon. "And if I am, what will you do then?" I asked.

"Get on the bed, my lady."

His voice was soft, but there was nothing meek in the command. I boldly stepped backward until I reached the bed and leaned against it, fingers sinking into the ebony throw placed tastefully on its edge. Once, I'd imagined what the fur would feel like on my bare skin.

I was about to find out.

Wrath jerked his chin, indicating he wanted me *all* the way on the bed, not simply perched against it. Heart thumping in anticipation, I lifted myself up and slid across the oversized mattress, biting back a moan as the soft fur quickly gave way to his cool silk sheets. It felt better than I'd imagined. Luxury and decadence mixed with something a bit wild and untamable.

Much like the master of this House of Sin.

Wrath unbuttoned his trousers, his gaze locked onto mine. A challenge in its own right to see if I was truly ready for what was to come. His pants hit the ground, and his hard length sprang free, intimidating and tantalizing, and just as eager to claim me.

I bit my lower lip, nearly overcome with want as I drank him in. Goddess above he was glorious. My attention slowly moved from his proud arousal and traveled along the rest of his body. Over six feet of pure muscle with bronze skin that seemed to glow with vitality filled my vision. He was a study of masculine power crossed with rugged beauty.

He stepped forward, and my focus shifted from the metallic snake inked onto his arm to the tattoo on his left thigh—a downward-facing

dagger with roses etched onto its surface.

I couldn't quite make out the geometric designs on its hilt, and as Wrath took himself in his tattooed hand and slowly pumped his fist, my mind emptied. The demon gave me a smug look, like he knew exactly what his seductive taunting was doing. *Goddess curse him.* I wanted to replace his hand with my own. Better yet, I wanted to use my…

… A violent crack split the air like an angry god's whip, and Wrath's bedchamber—along with the demon who owned it—vanished, replaced by an empty, cold room without any light.

It was such a drastic shift, I didn't immediately grasp that it was real. I blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the sudden dark. Shadows moved around what I sensed was a small space, almost writhing on top of one another in a frenzy.

Goose bumps rose along my arms as the chill in the air turned biting.

This had to be another strange illusion. I'd had a few before but none so vivid. They seemed to be triggered each time Wrath and I engaged in romantic acts, so that was probably the cause of this one now. I cursed the timing of this unwanted intrusion, loathing that someone else's past had taken me away from my delicious present.

I went to rub my temples but couldn't move my hands. My attention shot up, noticing a pair of manacles clamped tightly around my wrists. I tugged at them, but they were bolted high up in the ceiling. Chains clanked with each movement, the sound antagonizing my swiftly fraying nerves. *Blood and bones.* I glanced down. In this vision, I was just as nude as I was in my current reality. Wonderful. I'd left a dream only to enter a common nightmare.

I released a long sigh, my breath coming out in little white clouds, then tensed. *How odd.* Unlike other illusions, I also seemed to be in control of this one. It wasn't like stepping into a memory or seeing the past from someone else's perspective. My eyes narrowed.

If this wasn't an illusion or a memory…

"What in the seven hells is going on?" The unmistakable sound of a boot scraping over stone had my pulse pounding as a strong pang of fear shot through me. "Wrath?"

Somewhere close by, a match was struck, the hiss preceding the scent of sulfur as it wafted over. A small flame flickered on the far side of the room, though whoever had lit the candle was magically gone. I shook my chains again, yanking as hard as I could, but they didn't give an inch. Unless I ripped my hands off, I wasn't escaping until my abductor set me free.

To stave off rising panic, I squinted through the semidarkness, trying to find some clue of my location or my captor. It was a stone

chamber, and I was chained in an alcove of sorts.

In the center of the main room sat an altar carved from the pale stone that made up the walls and floor. Straw and dried herbs littered the ground. It almost reminded me of the monastery back home where my friend Claudia worked on the dead, but not quite.

Thinking of those chambers brought on memories of the invisible mercenary spies who once haunted me there. It felt like forever since I'd encountered an Umbra demon, and I fought a shudder. If I never saw one of those ghastly demons again, I would have lived a good, happy life.

"Whoever's there, show yourself."

I rattled my chains. The echo of metal clanking was the only response I received, though I swore I heard the faint sound of someone breathing nearby. I didn't see any puffs of breath, but I knew that didn't mean I was alone. Wrath would never play this kind of trick on me, especially given what we'd been about to do, which ruled this out as any twisted demon foreplay.

I mustered false bravado. "Even chained you're afraid of speaking with me?"

"Not scared," a deep, accented voice said from the darkness.

My breath caught. I'd heard his voice before but couldn't place where. It wasn't Anir—Wrath's human second-in-command. Nor did it sound like any of the demon prince's brothers. This accent was from my island in the mortal realm. I was certain of that.

"If you're not scared, then you have no reason to hide from me."

"I'm awaiting further orders."

"From whom?" Silence uncomfortably stretched between us. It was hard to feign authority while nude, chained, and speaking to a phantom kidnapper, but I tried anyway. "Whoever your master is will likely be here soon enough. There's no need for secrecy."

"You don't need to worry about me."

A phrase every murderer and criminal probably uttered to their victims right before they slit their throats, too. I swallowed hard. I needed him to keep talking to figure out who he was, and I'd found that annoying someone made them react, even if they didn't want to. Wrath and I had used that same tactic on each other over the last few months, and I could kiss him now for the practice.

"Did your master order you to remain in the shadows?"

"No."

"Hmm. I see."

"What?"

"You're simply a pervert who enjoys watching your victims, knowing they can't see you in return. Tell me, are you touching yourself now? Imagining what my skin feels like while stroking your

own? Why don't you come closer?" *And allow me to knee your groin into your lungs.* The man materialized in front of me with a look of pure aggravation on his face. Definitely not a demon, but that wasn't comforting. I drew in a sharp breath. "Domenico Nucci."

The young man who sold arancini with his family in Palermo stared at me with vehemence. Deadly looking claws shot out of his fingertips, then retracted, reminding me that he was no more human than I was. I'd almost forgotten that the man I'd thought my twin had been secretly courting was a shape-shifter. Werewolf, to be exact. Temperamental creatures at best, and based on what I remember his father telling me, I'd just provoked a newly shifted one. I had no idea how much control he had over his wolf, but I'd wager not much.

Domenico's eyes—normally warm brown—glowed an unearthly pale purple as they narrowed on me, confirming my suspicion. He was close to shifting.

I held my breath, waiting for him to deliver a death blow. He seemed on the verge of stepping closer, his jaw clenched from restraint as anger radiated off him like a furious sun. The wolf took several deep breaths, then rolled his shoulders, breaking the mounting tension. With a wave of his half-clawed hand, a few of the shadows broke away from the frenzy and re-formed around me, creating a dressing gown of sorts.

"Where are we?" I asked, ignoring the strangeness of my robe as it settled over my skin. And the fact that the werewolf had magicked it without so much as a whispered spell.

"The Shadow Realm."

I quietly absorbed the information. Growing up, Nonna Maria taught us about shape-shifters, along with a few other magical creatures. According to my grandmother's stories, the wolves fought supernatural wars between themselves and demons in the spirit realm, which must be what he meant by Shadow Realm.

I'd always pictured the spirit realm with ghosts walking through walls, haunting and ethereal like they were depicted in gothic novels. This was very different from my imagination. Domenico was fully corporeal. And I definitely felt the weight of the icy manacles as they bit into my skin. I also felt something I hadn't before—the slight buzz of magic in the metal. These were no ordinary shackles; they were spelled to keep my own powers locked away.

I sent a subtle prod to my magic's source and, just as I'd suspected, hit a barrier that prevented me from summoning fire.

I had a terrible feeling I knew who his master was and did not want my magic bound for our encounter. I glanced at my captor. I'd never heard of wolves transporting anyone with them to the spirit realm, and until now, I wouldn't have believed it possible, especially

for a newly shifted werewolf. Domenico must be immensely powerful. A future alpha in the making.

"Is my physical body still in the Seven Circles?" I asked.

Domenico ran his attention over me, his eyes losing some of that shifter glow. "Yes."

I wasn't sure how that was possible, and the werewolf's glare indicated he wouldn't answer another question about it. Knowing how dangerous he would be if he fully turned into a wolf, I left well enough alone. He'd given me the important information I needed anyway.

My body was still in Wrath's bedchamber, and the demon would undoubtedly be searching for a way to bring me back now. If I couldn't escape on my own, I simply needed to bide my time until he came for my soul and unleashed his power. Anyone foolish enough to attack his bride-to-be in his royal House deserved to feel his namesake sin. I almost grinned, imagining the carnage he'd wreak as he meted out justice, but caught myself.

"It's freezing here."

"Not for me."

I wanted to rub my hands over my arms, forcing warmth back into my nonbody, but couldn't with the chains. Domenico watched me closely, a menacing gleam entering his eyes. One wrong move would have his jaws clamped around my throat, no matter what his orders were. He was far more volatile than the first time I'd met him, though that was probably from the shift. I'd heard young wolves sometimes took years to fully mature.

Unable to tolerate his silent staring, I cleared my throat. "When I saw you in the monastery after Vittoria's 'murder,' I thought you were praying for her. I later discovered you were there because you'd shifted for the first time. Did you really not suspect what you were before then?"

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Do you know what you are, Emilia?"

It didn't escape me he'd said *what* not *who*. I had my suspicions, but he didn't need to know what they were.

"I know I'm your prisoner. I know Wrath will hunt you down and rip you limb from limb if any harm comes to me." I smiled, a vicious, wicked curve of my lips. The wolf seemed to realize that he might have chained me and bound my magic, but he wasn't the only predator in the chamber. "And there isn't a single realm you can hide in before he finds you. That is, if I don't get to you first. He is the merciful one. Keep that in mind."

"Well, well, sister."

Even though I'd been half-expecting her, hearing my twin's voice

caused my heart to clench painfully. My attention shot to the other end of the chamber, landing on Vittoria at once.

My sister glided around the small room like a ghost of the past, wearing a long white gown that flowed behind her as if caught on a phantom breeze. There was a dreamlike quality to her presence, but she was as real as me and Domenico. I carefully looked her over, searching for any injury, though I knew she was the one commanding the werewolf, not the other way around.

Tears pricked my eyes as it all sank in. Vittoria was truly here. Alive. It was hard to believe it had only been an hour or two since I'd learned she wasn't actually dead. Despite her treachery, I wanted to wrap her in my arms and never let go. This was a goddess-blessed miracle.

"Vittoria."

It was barely a whisper, but at the sound of my voice, my twin's lips twitched up in a familiar smirk. If I hadn't been chained, I'd have collapsed to my knees. Seeing her in the Triple Moon Mirror earlier was one thing; having her here, in front of me, was overwhelming. Words failed as my twin circled closer, watching me curiously.

"Let's unchain you and see what tricks you've learned." Her lavender eyes glittered, reminding me she had changed entirely. This wasn't the girl with brown eyes that matched mine. The young woman who'd loved to make her own drinks and perfumes. This stranger was something other. Something that made the fine hair along my arms stand on end. "Goddess knows I've got a few of my own to share. Shifter?"

Domenico moved with preternatural speed and fisted my hair, forcing my head to the side. He brought his nose to my neck and drew in a deep lungful of my scent, likely memorizing it to track me if I tried to escape. I cringed from the sudden pain but managed to bite back my yelp.

He snarled, the sound far from human as he brought his mouth to my ear. "Try anything stupid and I'll rip out more than just your mortal heart, Shadow Witch."

"Down, puppy." Vitoria tsked. "Don't play too rough. Yet."

Before I could absorb the hurt of that statement or wonder how much rougher things would get aside from being chained, Domenico shoved me away, and with another lazy wave of his hand, the locks on my manacles clicked open. My restraints clattered to the ground, the sound as foreboding as an executioner's blade coming down on the condemned.

This was it, the moment I'd been dreading, and I felt wholly unprepared.

Heart hammering, I turned my back on the raging werewolf and

faced my undead twin, steeling myself as our gazes met and held.

For months Vittoria had let me believe she was dead. Murdered violently. Allowed me to discover her heartless body, broken and bloody in that tomb. Tearing my world apart and destroying who I was on the most basic level. Vittoria's deceit was a wound that would never properly heal; it would forever leave emotional scars on my soul and in my heart.

Even with her standing before me now, alive and well, there was no hope of ever returning to *before*. Too much had passed between us to simply forget and move on, and that, more than anything else, was something I mourned. No matter how hard I wished otherwise, we'd both changed irrevocably. And I wasn't sure the pieces of our new lives fit together anymore.

To push past the growing ache in my chest, I thought about my betrothed. Of how my twin had ruined this night for me, too. Instead of sorrow, I focused on the fury, *the wrath* that had gotten me through my own personal hell. And all emotions, save one, disappeared.

If I'd been capable of feeling worry instead of pure wrath, perhaps my sister's triumphant grin would have caused a flicker of unease. As it stood, *she* was about to discover that she was not the only one capable of instilling apprehension. It was time Vittoria feared *me*.

I dipped into my source of magic, relieved to feel the enormous well of power that crackled under my skin. If my sister wanted to see what I was capable of, I'd gladly show her.

"You have five minutes to explain yourself." When I spoke, my voice was colder than the air around us, colder than even the most wicked circle of Hell. I swore the shadows paused before skittering into nothingness, hiding from the great reckoning they sensed coming.

"And then?" Vittoria asked.

My smile was a beautiful nightmare. For the first time, Vittoria's brow creased as if she'd just realized there was one fatal flaw in her plan. Monsters could be created but never tamed.

"And then, dear sister, you'll meet the witch you forced me to become."

TWO

"Bite your tongue or I'll remove it." Domenico stepped forward, claws extending and quietly snarling at the threat I posed, but Vittoria raised her hand, stalling him. I was too furious to be surprised at how quickly he backed down from the simple, unspoken command.

"Have you not become more powerful? More… bold?" Vittoria asked, cocking a brow. "You've finally stepped out of the safe little hole you've been hiding in, only to live a life now worthy of a bard's pen. Do they sing ballads of boring *witches*, wiling away their time in hot kitchens, pining after equally boring holy men like Antonio? I would imagine a grand romance with the king of demons is something much more interesting. Especially in the bedchamber. For the sake of the Great Divine above, Emilia. The death of your former life is something you should thank me for. Antonio, Sea & Vine, you and I were always meant for bigger things."

"Boring?" Anger lanced through me. "I *loved* my life and our kitchen. Apologies if what I consider fun, or who I found attractive, is so repulsive to you. And since when do you hate Sea & Vine? You loved our family and our time cooking together, too. Or have you forgotten us? In your quest for… whatever it is you're after. How could you do that to us, to *me*?"

My voice broke on the last question, and I yanked hard on my fury again, centering myself. Vittoria watched me closely. "I did what had to be done *for us*. It might not seem like it, but I swear this has all been for you and me. The curse—"

She bit down on whatever she wished to say but couldn't.

"Oh, yes, the curse." I swatted the air as if the curse were a bothersome housefly. "The bloody, fucking curse that no one can speak of. I'm finished with this fickle magic and every hexed being

involved! Why did you fake your murder? How was that in any way helpful to me?"

She seemed to choose her next words carefully. "Even the most volatile fuel requires a spark to cause flames."

Cryptic as always when the curse was at play. "Why could you possibly need so much fire?"

Her gaze turned into a hard, glittering gem of hatred. For a second, it wasn't lavender that flashed from her irises, but a deep ruby red. "To watch our enemies burn. To reclaim what is ours by might and birth. And to break the final chains that bind us once and for all."

"And our family? Are they your enemies? Did they deserve to bury you in that crypt? To believe you were rotting away with our ancestors?"

"Yes. Though I highly doubt they believed I was rotting away. That little lie was something I imagined they fed to you, their favored one. Or should I say, the most feared." Vittoria's admission fell between us, heavy under the weight of the truth she believed it to be. "And they aren't the only ones who will come to fear us. I have adopted one bit of advice from our dear family. Keep your acquaintances close, but your enemies closer."

I looked at the stranger who wore my sister's face. There was hardness in this Vittoria, darkness where light had once shined brightly. My sister had been playful, friendly. Capable of making friends and dancing for hours on end. A quality I'd always admired and wished to possess. This harsh version of her was difficult to reconcile. "What if I don't want to be feared?" I asked.

Vittoria's smile was a quick flash of teeth, razor-sharp and threatening. "A bird without wings is still a bird, sister mine."

"Have you been speaking to the Prince of Envy?" I heaved a sigh. "I swear you sound exactly like him after he's had too much truth-spelled demonberry wine."

"Envy?" Her gaze flickered inward with a memory. "I rode his pet vampire just to watch those green eyes flame with his favorite sin when he caught us. Vampires make exquisite lovers, being creatures of the night and all. They are masters of mixing pleasure with a bite of pain. Once you finish playing with your demon, you ought to visit the vampire court and give one or two a ride. I recently called upon their prince and was not at all disappointed. The things he could do with those fangs…"

Domenico growled, and my twin shot him a placating look. Clearly he hadn't known his—whatever my sister was to him—had cavorted with some of his mortal enemies. I was unaware there was a vampire court, and for the time being, it wasn't a priority to ask. Unless it suddenly became an issue, it was the least of my concerns

now.

"I…" I wanted to purge the thought of my twin bedding that particular vampire from my mind. I'd had the misfortune of meeting him once, and Alexei had been frightening. And not in a forbidden, dark fantasy type of way. He'd looked ready to rip out a heart to drink it dry for sport. "Why are you here now? I thought we were supposed to meet tomorrow on the Shifting Isles."

Vittoria lifted a shoulder, suddenly not meeting my gaze. "I wanted to deliver the message myself in case you didn't get the skull."

I didn't believe her but didn't call her on the obvious lie. My sister was keeping another secret, and it likely had something to do with the Shadow Realm since we were here. Perhaps it had been a test to see if Domenico could bring me here without any issues. Which meant our time was probably limited and I needed answers. "How did you fake removing your heart?"

"I didn't."

"I saw the blood. The gaping hole in your chest. Obviously, it was some magic or illusion, unless you no longer require a heart to live. Don't stand here and keep lying to my face. You've done quite enough of that over the last several months. I deserve to know the truth, Vittoria."

The temperature abruptly dropped, ice crystals snaking up the walls and crackling like frozen flames as they rapidly spread. The candle flickered in the sudden breeze before blowing out, leaving us in the dark. A thin ribbon of smoke curled through the air, the scent of sulfur permeating the coldness; an omen sent from a ferocious hell god. One I knew well.

Domenico stepped forward, wrapping a hand around my twin's upper arm, and tugged her near. "Time to go. He's breached the Shadow's wards."

My heart thrummed. I knew exactly who *he* was. Wrath had come for my soul, charging across the barrier of the spirit realm, his namesake sin powerful enough to make even the ground here tremble at his approach. I palpably felt his fury, and it did something peculiar to me in this realm. I suddenly wasn't thinking of my twin's betrayal or feeling hurt. Heat crept over me where the cold had previously sunk its teeth. Wrath's sin made me feel alive, buzzing. It also made me want to shed civility and become an elemental force fueled by baser instincts.

Vittoria's lips lifted in a half smirk. "Remember, sister. Enjoy the sausage all you like, but don't purchase the pig. It's the only warning I can offer."

"Why should I listen to you?"

"I'm your blood." Domenico half-dragged her across the chamber,

then waved his hand until a glittering portal opened before them. Vittoria paused, glancing back at me. “Some bonds can never be broken, Emilia. And some choices have consequences akin to death. Take it from someone who knows all too well what that’s like.”

Chills danced down my spine from the first part of her warning. Wrath had said something similar to me on the night I discovered the truth of why he’d given me his royal Mark.

My fingers absently brushed against the nearly invisible *S* on my neck, the magic causing a slight, pleasant tingle that traveled down my nonbody.

“What does that mean?” I demanded. “No more games, Vittoria.”

“Choose him and you’ll give up part of yourself,” she said, offering an answer that only raised more questions. “See you tomorrow. Don’t be late.”

“Stop! Why must we meet on the Shifting Isles?” I asked. “Why not tell me what you need here?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.” Vittoria blew me a kiss, then stepped through the portal with the werewolf on her heels. Apparently, Domenico, an alpha in his own right, knew a bigger threat had entered his territory. Retreat was the smart option. Or perhaps he’d only choked on his pride to save my twin. I wasn’t sure how I felt after our encounter; too many emotions were warring against one another, but I was grateful she had a loyal ally. She needed one.

“Emilia.”

Wrath strode into the chamber a moment later, his body humming with the threat of an impending war. A battle he was bringing to our enemies. He glared at the closing portal, then swept his attention over me, sharp as the blade in his fist and promising the same level of violence on anyone who’d hurt me. I glanced down, noticing the shadow robe had also abandoned its post at his arrival. Once again I stood nude, but not cowed.

“Did they harm you?” His voice was clipped, as if he were saving all his energy for the fight. Domenico might have escaped, but Wrath would hunt him down. The cold, unforgiving look on his face promised nothing but pain and torment.

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak the partial lie. Harm wasn’t always inflicted physically. “It was my sister. She wanted to make sure I received her message about tomorrow. Where are the Shifting Isles?”

“Just outside the mainland.” The demon’s gaze methodically took in each inch of the chamber before coming to rest on the manacles. In a flash, his blade was gone and he was in front of me, gently bringing my wrists up for closer inspection. Red splotches that would turn into nasty bruises had Wrath’s anger flaring impossibly higher. His voice

was now laced with deadly promise, and the air turned so frigid my teeth began to chatter. “If *anyone* chains you again, I will become every nightmare mortals have ever had of me and then some.”

Ice shot up the walls and coated the ceiling as the temperature continued to plummet. Chunks of stone cracked and fell to the ground. If he didn’t rein in his temper soon, we’d both be encapsulated in ice or buried under stone.

“What if I ask *you* to tie me up?”

The harsh expression on Wrath’s face faltered as he blinked down at me. He hadn’t expected that. Good. Perhaps we’d make it out of this realm before we turned into ice sculptures. I disentangled myself from his light grasp and wrapped my arms around his middle, listening to his heart beat faster from the embrace. Almost immediately, I felt warmer.

“Simply saying ‘I love you; I’m pleased you’re all right’ would have sufficed, too.”

A beat of silence passed, and I could practically feel Wrath straining to leash himself. Only his iron will would cage the immense power struggling to break out, to attack. I couldn’t imagine the discipline, the absolute control he had over his namesake sin, to finally wrangle his wrath into submission. The air warmed a fraction, though it was still deathly frigid.

He held me a little closer, as if comforting himself that I was safe and secure. “Torturing and disemboweling your enemies would be an *act* of love.”

“No one can deny you are a demon of action.” I snorted and drew back enough to see mirth entering his eyes in place of the icy rage, though there was still something haunted in his expression that wasn’t as quick to disappear. “Take me home, please. It’s been a long night. I need a warm bath and an entire bottle of demonberry wine.”

And, no matter what had just happened or the warning Vittoria tried imparting, I still wanted to claim my king in the flesh. That, more than anything else, would soothe me, mind, body, and cursed soul.

Wrath magicked us back to his bedchamber, reuniting our souls with our physical forms, and I blinked at a room encapsulated in ice. The ceiling, walls, fireplace—*everything* except the bed—were frozen, the ice so thick it gave off a bluish tint. I thought the Shadow Realm had been bad, but this was extreme. I gingerly pushed myself up from where I’d been lying and raised a questioning brow. Wrath ran a hand

through his hair, the action drawing my attention to cuts on his knuckles I hadn't noticed before.

"Did you have to fight wolves?" I asked, beckoning him to come closer. "Please. Let me see that." Reluctantly he did, offering me his injured hand. "Why isn't this healing?"

"I punched through the realms."

His expression was coolly aristocratic, and if I hadn't come to know him these months, I might have missed the subtle signs that he was still churning with emotion. His sensual mouth was set in a hard line, his chiseled jaw strained. There was a ruthless flicker in his gaze —an unyielding promise to commit terrible acts of violence—that gave away how close he'd just come to ripping the realm apart. A shiver rolled down my spine, and whatever dark place he'd been in disappeared.

"It's all right," he said. "Easily fixable."

"I don't care about the state of the *room*. Are *you* all right?"

The demon prince gave me a tight smile. "I am now."

I'd never seen him lose his temper with such a massive showing of his power and wondered at the severity of his reaction. At what he might not be able to tell me or might not wish to tell me. I sensed he needed time to sort through it all and gave him a small smile in return. "As long as you're certain."

"I am." He magically set the room to rights and had just called for the tub to be filled when there was a knock at the door. If I could have hexed someone right then, I would have.

"Don't answer it," I half-groaned. "I beg you."

Wrath looked torn but heeded my request. After casting a ward to keep everyone away from entering his private quarters, he swept my legs out from under me and walked us into his bathing chamber, kicking the door shut behind us.

I hadn't seen this room before and took in its elegant beauty. Slate-colored floors, black marble walls with gold veining, candles dripping ebony wax, faucets and fixtures in gleaming gold, and a massive claw-foot bathtub that could fit several people in the center of the room.

An oversized black crystal chandelier hung low over the tub, completing the look. The room was dark, sensual, and utterly relaxing. Just what I needed after my stressful evening.

The prince carefully deposited me into the bath, then returned with a chilled glass of demonberry wine, the silver seeds sparkling like miniature stars in the candlelight. For the first time in what felt like hours, I exhaled, feeling peaceful.

Wrath drew a stool over to the tub and sat, watching me sip my drink and submerge myself to my shoulders in the perfectly warmed

water. “Do you want to talk about your sister?”

“Not particularly.” I sighed. “I still don’t understand why she wants to meet on the Shifting Isles. It would be much easier to simply talk here. Is there any reason why that you can think of?”

Wrath didn’t respond right away. “Maybe she has something there she wants you to see.”

“You’re probably right. But she could also simply tell me that. I don’t understand all the cloak-and-dagger theatrics. Though I suppose that is very Vittoria in a way. Maybe one of the *only* familiar aspects about her.” I took another sip of wine, savoring the bright flavors that burst over my tongue. “How did you punch your way into the Shadow Realm?”

“I’m the king of the underworld. The spirit realm is under my domain. And even if it wasn’t, do you really believe a lone werewolf would stop me from getting to you?”

“I’m not sure anything could stop you. What’s it like to be invincible?” I teased.

Wrath’s expression turned contemplative as he pulled a linen cloth from a tray near the tub and dunked it into the water. He upended a glass bottle of soap over it, then motioned for me to spin around. “Lift your hair.”

I happily obliged his request to pamper me. He dragged the soapy linen across my shoulders, gently washing my body before dipping it back into the water. Wrath, the mighty demon of war, was giving me a sponge bath. And it felt positively divine.

For someone who’d just frozen his entire bedchamber in a rage, he certainly could be warm and kind. At least where I was concerned. I doubted anyone else ever saw this side of the demon. Which made me appreciate his actions all the more.

Goose bumps rose along the careful lines he made from my neck, following the curve of my spine down to my bottom. He tenderly lifted one arm at a time, paying special care to my sore wrists. Slight coolness nipped at the air, and I realized he must be exercising an enormous amount of restraint to not have his anger overwhelm the temperature again.

Once he thoroughly saw to my back and arms, he slowly moved to my sides, skimming the underside of my breasts, causing my nipples to harden as he drifted closer to them. I didn’t think he was intentionally attempting to seduce me, but that didn’t stop my body from reacting to his ministrations. Heat pooled between my thighs, and my thoughts immediately shifted to where he’d drag that cloth next. If my luck had finally turned this evening, perhaps he’d use his fingers instead of the linen. I leaned back, granting him better access to that particular place…

“There is a hexed blade that can kill me.”

A chill descended, erasing the pleasant feeling at once. I sat up, twisting around, the sudden movement splashing water onto the pristine floor. “What?”

“Your so-called First Witch created hexed objects. Our records indicate three, but the actual number was never confirmed. Only one was ever found to be truly dangerous to a prince of Hell, the Blade of Ruination.”

As if that made it better. “Please tell me you are in possession of it.”

Wrath held my gaze, the strength and power of it meant to fortify my nerves. It had the opposite effect. The prince sighed. “None of the objects have been recovered. They disappeared when the witch and her spies did.”

“You can be killed.”

He offered a slight incline of his head in confirmation. The thought of someone extinguishing his flame had panic irrationally seizing me. All these months we’d spent arguing, fighting each other and our attraction. And it could be gone. Some selfish, hateful creature could take him from me. I thought he was invincible, and this one hexed blade made him too vulnerable for my liking. Made every little thing except cherishing our time together insignificant. With the rival demon House daggers, he could be injured, but not *killed*.

Perhaps it was my sister’s reemergence in my life, the fact that she was capable of anything, including faking her own murder, that had me coming undone. Or maybe it was whatever she’d been testing tonight by bringing me to that realm. Maybe they wanted to see how long it would take for Wrath to track me there. I had no idea if he could be harmed in that realm with his soul detached from his body. One thing I was certain of: I couldn’t trust my sister.

If Vittoria got her hands on that blade, she’d probably attack Wrath. She’d warned me not to complete our marriage bond; I could see her ensuring that never happened. I had no idea who her enemies were, but I knew she’d go to impossible lengths to destroy them. If she believed my marriage to Wrath would in any way force me to give up part of myself that she needed for her plans, he would definitely become an enemy in her eyes.

With strength that seemed to catch the demon off guard, I yanked Wrath forward, pulling him off the stool and into the tub, clothes and all. I needed to feel him. Alive and breathing and solid beneath me. I leapt onto his lap and tugged his wet shirt open, buttons flying across the floor and bouncing into the tub as I pressed my hand to his heart, my own beating rapidly.

If anyone took him from me… my magic surged up, ready to

incinerate this realm and every other one that possibly existed. That ancient, rumbling power I'd felt once before cracked an eye deep in my center. Whatever that monster was, it was growing more ravenous the longer it remained awake. It wanted to be set free, to ravage and destroy. And I barely held it at bay.

Buds of rose-gold flame burst into the air above us, the fiery flowers unfurling along with burning roots and stems with thorns. It was a garden made from embers and flames. And I suddenly couldn't tell if my eyes were open or closed; all I saw was a rose-gold haze as my rage took magical form. I breathed in a ragged breath and exhaled, half-convinced flames and smoke would follow. Vines with sharp, oversized thorns twisted up around the tub, crept up the walls; in moments, we'd be overtaken by them…

Strong, powerful hands slid down my body, the sensation grounding me as the maelstrom within calmed a fraction. I swallowed hard, my throat parched, as I inhaled deeply and dragged my attention to the demon. Wrath gave me a bemused look but didn't stop lightly caressing me, like he knew I was still half under the spell of my fury. My attention followed the careful path his hands traveled, my breathing evening out with each long, slow stroke.

My rage simmered, then sputtered out, taking the swell of magic with it. The burning flowers slowly returned to embers, then charred, the ash drifting away on a magical wind Wrath must have summoned. The vines also receded back to wherever I'd wrenched them from. I hadn't even known that was something I could do, but Wrath didn't appear surprised.

I watched in silence as the room returned to normal, though inside my emotions were still churning like the sea after a particularly brutal storm. Wrath's caresses slowed, then stopped, his hands now resting on my waist. We stared at each other, not acknowledging I'd lost control.

"I thought my death would no longer excite you as it once would have." His tone was light and teasing, but I detected an undercurrent of tension. "Should I be worried?"

Should I be? I glanced down, noticing that I'd somehow straddled him and that my hands were fisted in his half-torn-off clothing. I very much appeared to be on the verge of savagery. Maybe he should worry. I could barely contain myself once I entered that dark place filled with rage. It was like all humanity had been stripped away and I was nothing but an elemental force meant to destroy.

Though, upon closer inspection, the rock-hard bulge nestled against my apex said Wrath enjoyed my rough handling. I eased my death grip on his clothing. "I want to find this blade."

The smile that had been tugging at the corners of his lips formed

into a wicked grin. “While I admitted to being fond of knife play, I’m afraid this one is off-limits. We can play with my dagger. The magic imbued in it won’t hurt me.”

“Don’t make light of this. If Vittoria gets that hexed blade first…”

“She’ll have to get in a very long line of demons searching for it. Envy’s spies, for one, are always listening for whispers of it across the realm. If it’s in the Seven Circles, he’ll find it.”

“Because Envy—of all demons—is precisely who I’d trust with a blade that can kill you.”

I silently counted to ten. How quickly the princes forgot stabbing and gutting one another. A thousand centuries could pass and I’d never forget the way Wrath’s blood had coated my hands after Envy had sunk his House dagger into him.

“My brother is many things, but a murderer he is not.” Wrath tucked a damp strand of hair behind my ear. While he could make that claim with certainty, I couldn’t. My sister would slay our family if it served her ultimate goal. I seemed to be exempt from her vengeance, which meant she needed me for her plan. For now, at least. “When the blade is close, I can sense its magical imprint. I’m not entirely without defense, my lady. Most would think twice before attacking me.”

Unless they were confident the weapon they had could put him down.

“How close?” I caught the slight wince he wasn’t quick enough to hide, and dread filled me again. “I see. So it has to be *extremely* close for you to sense it. Wonderful.”

I stood up, bathwater running down my body in rivulets as I stepped out of the tub. The idea of relaxing was no longer appealing. I wanted to tear this realm apart, inch by inch, and find this hexed blade. Wrath arched a brow but didn’t say a word as I bypassed the towel and strode toward his bedchamber, dripping all over his immaculate tile.

My clean clothes were in the next chamber, and without thinking, I opened the door to the corridor that connected our rooms. The man standing on the other side dropped the fist he’d been about to knock with, his tawny skin going scarlet.

“Devil’s blood, Em.” Anir cringed. “Warn someone before you march around like”—he waved a hand at me—“that.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “Have you ever seen a naked woman before?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“What about men? Have you seen a man bathing or strutting around without a stitch of clothing on? Considering where we live, I imagine you’ve seen much more than that.”

“I have, but—”

“Then kindly step aside and stop blushing like a boy in his small clothes.”

Wrath’s human second-in-command glanced up at the ceiling, as if requesting divine assistance. When he brought his attention back down, he stared at a point over my shoulder. The prickle of heat indicated Wrath had come up behind me.

“Is there a problem?” he asked, draping a robe around my shoulders.

“Yes, your majesty.” Anir was no longer blushing. “House Greed has requested your presence at once.”

A terrible feeling skittered across my skin like a horde of spiders as I cinched the robe around my waist. “What’s happened?”

“Greed’s circle has been breached.” Anir glanced between me and the demon at my back, his expression grim. “There’s been a murder.”

THREE

House Greed did not give the appearance that anything nefarious was afoot.

Well, anything more nefarious than the gambling club's patrons lining up to be admitted to the sin-fueled den of iniquity.

I stood beside Wrath on the main floor we'd entered, waiting for our escorts, my gloved hands tightly gripping the ornate bronze railing as I gazed two stories down into the receiving hall.

On the brief carriage ride across the Black River to this House of Sin, Wrath had asked me to not speak until we'd entered Greed's private quarters. Curious demons would be paying close attention to our rival House and the appearance of the king. It was best, Wrath said, to make them wonder. Greed did not want word spreading of the murder he'd called an "extremely unfortunate incident" in his letter. He wanted his subjects to be focused solely on indulging their greed, ever concerned with adding to his power.

I took the silent moments to inspect House Greed, interested in seeing how the sins shaped each demon court. Four grand, curving staircases converged in the center of the room, spilling patrons in from each corner they'd arrived from, though the circular chamber below was merely a place for members of the House to await gondolas.

Merlot-colored water snaked off in different directions, the signs above each canal indicating a different gaming hall patrons could choose for their entertainment. From where we stood, the water combined with the staircases resembled a beating heart and its chambers. I'd never been to Venice, but something about the flat-bottomed boats and canals reminded me of that famed city.

Except everything here was contained within the enormous castle. And was fitted to the extreme with riches. The gaming hell I'd visited

in Palermo was nothing compared with the splendor of this House of Sin. In the mortal realm, Greed's den was a secret, underground establishment that changed locations on a whim, worthy of being deemed a "hell." There, it was easy to imagine innocents like Domenico's father getting fleeced by card sharks and being completely taken over by the demon's greedy influence.

Here, it was an entirely different story. The gleaming fixtures and elegant mosaic tiles were as carefully curated as the patrons' neutral expressions. No one appeared to be in danger of losing their innocence; these were all various kinds of predators circling one another, each more dangerous than the last. Women and men both wore their finest clothes, the silks and brocades and stitches and embroidery all speaking to their wealth. And if their clothing didn't inspire greed, their sparkling jewels did. Half of their adornments could fetch enough coin to feed a village for a year.

I was surprised that some didn't simply wear gemstones—they'd had them fused to their skin. Diamonds and pearls and all manner of gems glinted from lips and noses and brows.

A few women even had gemstones tastefully placed on the side of their hands and forearms in place of gloves, while some more daring demons opted to wear only long, flowing skirts that had slits traveling high up each thigh, their bare breasts also sparkling with jewels.

Not to be outdone, men strode down the stairs toward the lines of gamblers waiting for their gondolas wearing nothing but jewels on their well-endowed members and smirks on their lips. Apparently there was a fine line between inspiring greed, lust, and envy. As I'd been learning held true for most demon circles. Sin and vice overlapped often, though the way they were expressed in each circle was slightly different.

Before I could ask Wrath about the body adornments, two lesser demons entered the balcony and beckoned for us to follow them. One had the pale green skin and eyes of a reptile, and the other was covered in short fur and had the liquid ebony eyes of a deer.

Large antlers curved back from the second one's head, and I swallowed hard, remembering the first time I'd encountered these two particular guards. Except for a chance encounter with Domenico Nucci Senior, I'd been alone the night I'd found Greed in the private office of his traveling gaming hell, these demons standing watch.

They were my introduction to lesser demons. Though after my encounter with the witch-blood-craving Aper demon, they were by far the most civil.

Wrath nodded to them, then motioned for me to walk ahead. We traveled down a secret, winding staircase that deposited us in a private tunnel where a gondola waited at a quiet dock. Torches cast

shadows along the stone walls, dark enough to hide a spy.

The reptile demon jerked his chin at the gondola. “This boat is spelled to take you directly to his highness. Do not attempt to get off until it docks.”

With that word of warning, the two guards inclined their heads slightly, then disappeared back up the stairs. A slight crease formed between Wrath’s brows as he took in our conveyance. It looked the same as the other boats, if perhaps a bit more gilded.

“What is it?” I asked, my own focus drifting back to the unsettling shadows before returning to my prince.

Wrath stared at the canal and the boat a beat longer. “Greed’s power propels the boats, and the demon-fueled water boosts—or more accurately, reflects—his sin. It’s a system that helps expend as little energy as possible on his end, while still using his magic.”

“So it will be like traveling in the Sin Corridor, but only focused on greed?”

“Yes.” Wrath held my gaze. “You will need to lock all your emotions down. My training lessons were powerful, but this will be even more so because of the demon water. It will sense your hidden desires and target them just as they were targeted in the Sin Corridor.”

The seemingly innocent boat and merlot-stained demon waterway suddenly felt ominous. “I wish I knew this was a potential issue sooner. Perhaps I could have taken a tonic.”

“I didn’t think my brother would wish to meet in the heart of his club. Greed has a building he uses for meetings outside the castle proper.” He held out his hand, helping me into the gondola before following me onto it. “You can fight this, Emilia. You’re strong enough and have trained hard. Remember what to feel for—that slight lick of magic, then shut it down.”

My foot touched the bottom of the boat the second he said “lick,” and the timing couldn’t be more unfortunate. Desire raked its claws over my skin before I shook the magic away. Wrath hadn’t exaggerated; the demon waterway certainly enhanced this circle’s magic. I greedily wanted Wrath’s touch—had craved it all night—and the circle knew it.

I quickly sat on the bench opposite Wrath, arranging my clothing to give my hands something to do. I’d chosen a gown with blush-colored tulle skirts and a black velvet bodice that had little gold and pink flowers sewn onto the straps and carefully placed around the sweetheart neckline. It was modest by demon fashion standards, but it was soft and pretty and I liked the way it made me feel. Perhaps a little too much. And so did my prince.

Wrath’s attention moved over the corset as the boat pushed itself off the dock and began gliding over the otherwise quiet water. Maybe

it was the magic of the realm, or our betrothal bond, or the excess greed pumping through the lone canal, but that slight spark of desire suddenly blazed again the longer my prince admired me. All I could think of was how much I wanted to be in Wrath's bedchamber.

I clenched my knees together, tried counting the waves our gondola made, but that worked against me. Thinking of waves lapping made me think of Wrath's skilled tongue and all the things he'd done to me with it. I squeezed my eyes shut, but that only brought on memories of Wrath between my thighs, a king indulging in a royal feast.

Blood and bones. I needed release.

"Emilia." Wrath's voice held a note of warning, but it did nothing to soothe me or bring my desire under control. If anything, it made me crave him all the more. "Breathe."

I exhaled slowly, thinking of the reason we were invited here. Murder. For the love of the goddess. That ought to be enough to dampen the fires of passion, but one look at Wrath's strained face indicated he was struggling, too. Fantastic. My lack of control was bleeding over to him. If he unleashed himself now, we'd both be in trouble.

I focused on the waterway, on the rippling surface of the merlot waves. There were fewer torches this far into the tunnel, larger stretches of darkness. I'd almost wrangled my emotions back into a tight fist when I saw the bulge form in the demon's trousers. That was all it took for me to submit to the sea of sin and my own wants.

Without breaking his stare, I removed my gloves, then stood, gently rocking the boat with the motion, and went to my knees before him. Power, unlike any magic I'd summoned before, filled me as something dark and dangerous glittered in his eyes.

"What are you doing?"

A coy smile curved my lips as I unfastened his trousers. "Conquering, your majesty."

"Emilia—" Before he could remind me why this wasn't a good idea, as if I weren't already aware of that, I pulled his hard length free and slowly licked him from tip to base. "Demon's blood," he growled as I closed my mouth around him and sucked a little harder, testing the action. His hands fisted at his sides. "You're going to destroy me."

Recalling what I'd seen at Gluttony's House of Sin during the Feast of the Wolf, I gripped him in hand and repeated the motion using my mouth and tongue to work him, moving a little faster and holding him a little tighter with each pump, adoring the rasp of his breath.

Wrath sat still, allowing me to set the pace, but from the way his thighs tensed, I could tell he was holding himself back. And I wanted no part in that. This moment was meant for unleashing ourselves. I

glanced up, silently commanding him to give in to his own dark passion. To show me just how wicked he could be. Because I wanted it. And so did he.

When he still didn't move, I grew bolder. "Stand up, your majesty."

Understanding flared in his eyes. With an impressive curse, he obeyed my order, then sank his fingers into my hair, guiding himself deeper. The boat rocked dangerously, but the flat bottom ensured we wouldn't tip over. Perhaps that was why they were used here. I doubted we were the first travelers to give in to the greedy desire pumping through our veins.

I grasped onto Wrath's hips, loving that this mighty demon was finally losing control. I might be the one on my knees, but I owned him in this moment. And he well knew it.

His grip tightened in my hair, possessive and an edge shy of painful, yet it made my knees clench together from the pleasure steadily building in *me*. It did not matter that we were in a rival demon House. That at any moment someone might spy us in a compromising position. Only pleasure mattered. And maybe it was greed fueling me, or maybe I didn't mind the thought of others greedily watching us from the shadows. In fact, that scandalous thought made the honeyed heat in my belly spread, made me grow bolder still, hungrier for as much pleasure as I could get. I tugged him closer, urging him to thrust deeper, to not deny me my greed-fueled desire to taste him. I wanted him to mark me in every way, just as I intended to mark him.

"Fuck." He needed no further encouragement.

Wrath pumped into my mouth as if he were pounding that slick junction of my body, claiming me with the same fervor I'd soon claim him. That very area throbbed at the thought of him being there now, dominating because I wished him to, but only in that one instance.

His awareness of my growing arousal must have finally sent him careening over the edge. With one last thrust and a groan that was more animal than human, he came undone. He gently stroked my hair back, massaging my skull tenderly as if he'd just realized how tightly he'd been holding on.

I swallowed him down, then gave one final, slow lick, grinning as he twitched from the aftershocks of pleasure.

"Godsdamn, Emilia."

"That was… incredible." I went to my feet, feeling immensely gratified. "I'm not sure who enjoyed that more."

"I'm curious to test that theory." He reached for me, a sinful twinkle in his eye, when the trance we'd both been in was suddenly broken by the sound of a throat clearing.

I yanked my attention up and froze. The Prince of Lust leaned against a doorway that led down a narrow corridor, arms crossed. I hadn't seen the corridor or the prince. Not that I really cared to look for either; Wrath had held all my greedy attention.

"If you're both quite through," Lust said, managing to sound immensely bored despite what he'd witnessed, "there's a little matter of murder to attend to." Even fully dressed, I still felt the heat of a blush kissing my cheeks at being caught. Lust watched his brother, shaking his head slightly. "Put your cock away and follow me. You'll have plenty of time to pleasure your bride later. Greed sent me to see what was taking so long. He's losing his temper. And you know how irksome that can become when any of us feel another sin."

"Leave us." Wrath's voice was glacial, like his expression. "We'll be there shortly."

"Afraid I can't do that," Lust volleyed back. "Wouldn't want you to get distracted again."

The greedy influence was gone, but the desire wasn't. I was still tempted to ignore Lust and Greed in favor of finishing what Wrath and I had started. I wanted to know what my prince had planned for me. "Did you—"

"See you blow my brother until he questioned his belief in the Divine?" A devious smile curled the edges of his lips. "Let's just say I was impressed, Shadow Witch. And that's saying a lot for the lord of pleasure."

"That's not what I was going to ask." I shot him a nasty look as Wrath assisted me out of the boat. "Did you use your influence on us?"

"Didn't need to. You both greedily went after your pleasure on your own. That little tableau was all you—and our demonic host. If it makes you feel better, I called out several times. I assumed you wanted the attention, so I gave it." Lust cocked his head. "Are you planning on putting that vicious little mouth on me while my brother pleasures you from behind?"

My body flushed crimson. "You're disgusting."

"Your blush sings a different tune," Lust said. "If you're wondering, yes, it would feel twice as good as you imagine. Though I suspect my brother would have my balls for trying. Remind me to send you a gift later from House Lust."

The prince of pleasure stuck his hands into his pockets and turned, walking down the corridor as if he were out for an evening stroll.

"Hurry along," he called over his shoulder. "Some of us have yet to indulge in our baser desires. Murder, unfortunately, seems to be an aphrodisiac only for House Wrath. Surprising to none, actually."

FOUR

The Prince of Greed scowled from behind his gilded desk. “You’re late.”

We paused just inside the threshold of his private chamber, surveying the occupants. Greed, Lust, and two demon guards. Wrath brushed his knuckles against the back of my hand, then strode into what appeared to be Greed’s study, promptly commandeering one of the velvet wingback chairs without uttering a single word. His expression didn’t shift, but I felt the iciness in it. The cold, imperious royal had replaced the warm lover from a few minutes before.

Wrath looked every inch the king he was, claiming his throne. Power emanated from him that wasn’t purely magical in nature—it was his confidence, his knowledge that he owned every space he walked into, even in a House of Sin that wasn’t his. Wrath’s words from a card game we once played came back to me suddenly. *“I believe I’m powerful, therefore I am.”*

Others believed it, too. Greed watched him, eyes narrowed, but didn’t strike out.

I made my way into the room, but stood back, taking in the princes and the aggression that continued to radiate from each of them. As far as pissing contests went, it was subtle but effective. *Stride into a space, act as if you own it, and bow to no one.* I’d need to remember that. Greed was barely leashing his anger, which only fueled Wrath’s sin, giving him the upper hand.

Silence ticked by, the tension in the room growing thicker the longer the brothers stared at each other. Wrath’s eyes glinted as Greed’s grip on his tumbler tightened. He looked half ready to throw the liquor glass at Wrath, but he must have thought better of it when he noticed the demon of war’s dangerous grin.

“Were you saying something?” Wrath’s tone was conversational, but there was an edge of danger in the casual way he leaned forward, as if he wanted to lure his brother into thinking he was about to share a secret. The promise of violence simmered just below the surface of his elegant veneer—something far too primal to remain hidden beneath the finery any longer.

Greed must have sensed the same danger. He inhaled slowly, then exhaled. “I got word you arrived here forty minutes ago. Keeping your host waiting is rude, especially given the circumstances of our meeting.”

From where he now leaned against an oversized mantel sandwiched between floor-to-ceiling paintings, Lust released a low chuckle but didn’t comment on either of his brothers’ behavior. I was surprised he didn’t offer the reason for our tardiness.

After the way Lust had torn all happiness and pleasure from me back in Palermo during the bonfire, he was by far my least favorite of Wrath’s brothers. He didn’t seem to notice—or care—that leaving someone an empty husk for sport was not the way to win friends. If Wrath hadn’t brought me out from that dark place I’d been lost in, I’d likely still be curled up in bed.

“You’re lucky we came at all.” Wrath finally sat back, ignoring Lust’s snort at his choice of words. I released a quiet breath, unaware I’d been holding it for so long, and shook my head. Adolescents, the cursed lot of them. “A midnight murder in your circle is hardly a major concern of House Wrath. This could have waited until morning to deal with.”

“I disagree.” Greed set his tumbler down. “Theo? Bring the hexed skull.”

A blue-skinned demon with brilliant red eyes and vampirelike fangs came in from a secret panel hidden within the wall of books flanking the desk. In his hands was something familiar: a human skull. Unlike the ones I’d received, this one had dark rubies in its eyes, adding to the terror.

I swallowed hard, already fearing what was about to happen. Once the skull was placed on the edge of Greed’s desk, it magically came to life, speaking in a voice that raised the hairs along my body. Only this time the voice didn’t sound like my twin; it sounded like a true nightmare.

“Tick tock, goes the clock, counting down your dread. Unless you cede, you’ll watch more bleed. To pay you back, the next attack will be the highest head, dearest Prince of Greed.”

Greed settled his attention on Wrath again. “The monstrosity must have found out about our alliance. She no doubt believes I was acting on your behalf all along and, therefore, wanted to teach me a lesson

for double-crossing her. This"—he jerked his chin at a second demon with a toad's head, who quickly stepped forward, rolling a cart with a shroud over it—"is what's left of my prized third."

The toad demon yanked the shroud off the body, and the stench hit me at the exact time the horrid sight did. My hand flew to cover my mouth. There was hardly anything recognizable of the demon left. Chunks of bloodied meat, stringy sinew, some bones. Bones that appeared to have been gnawed on by great, serrated teeth. My stomach lurched.

"Goddess above."

Each of the prince's attention shifted to me, but I didn't return any of their gazes. I refused to look away from the body. I was to be queen. And a queen, especially one hailing from House Wrath, didn't shy away from the terrible parts of ruling. She welcomed them.

"What do you think attacked…" From what was left, I could not tell the sex of the victim.

"Vesta." Greed moved to stand over the remains, his voice quiet. It was the first time I'd seen him act in any way human. Out of each of the princes I'd met, I always thought he didn't care to play the role of anything other than a prince of Hell. "She was the commander of my army. Unique. Coveted by many."

"Why was she coveted?" I asked.

Greed motioned for her to be taken away before answering me. "Because of her immense talent at strategy and battle."

I didn't say so aloud, but her immense fighting talent hadn't saved her from her fate.

An unfamiliar demon slipped into the room as what was left of the body was rolled out. He slowly removed a bloodied pair gloves and tossed them into a garbage bin. His hair was a shade caught somewhere between silver and gold, as if it were too lazy to be bothered with choosing one color. I took in the shrewd eyes that were now studying me as closely, a blue so pale they could only be described as ice. He slowly turned his attention to the princes.

"It's as we suspected." His words came out in a quiet drawl. "Werewolf attack."

"You're certain?" Wrath asked, coming to stand beside me.

"It's either that or a hellhound," the blue-eyed demon returned. "Have you set yours loose in other circles lately?" Wrath's only response was an impressive glare. "Didn't think so. There are few other creatures with the strength and power to cause those marks in the bone. Given what we know of our main suspect and who she associates herself with, it's the conclusion that makes the most sense. Especially combined with the rubies. Though I can't rule out any other beast for certain. The lacerations were definitely made by claws, not a

blade."

"Father slay me," Lust groaned. "Must you always speak as if you're reciting a medical text?"

My interest shifted away from my own thoughts to regard the demons. The princes rarely spoke to other demons in such a derogatory manner, which meant this blue-eyed one was related to them. There was only one prince I hadn't been formally introduced to, though I'd been curious after catching the briefest glimpse of him at House Gluttony during the Feast of the Wolf.

I studied the blue-eyed demon again.

"You're the Prince of Sloth," I said. He inclined his head but didn't elaborate. "I thought you'd be—"

"Lazier?" Lust supplied. "He is, trust me. All he does is lounge about with his books. His House is one giant, messy library. Not an orgy or sinful tableau to be found in the whole of his circle. I can't tell you the last time he engaged in debauchery. I bet he hasn't even stroked his own cock in a decade. Fucking insulting to demons everywhere."

Sloth gave his brother a slow smile that was anything but pleasant. "There are many texts in my collection that outline adventurous sexual positions. I probably know more ways to make a body shiver from pleasure than you do."

"You may know *how* to," Lust said, "but actually *doing* it is an entirely different thing. You'd need to put the book down and put some effort into it."

"I can still read with someone's mouth on my—"

"That's enough," Wrath interrupted just as a dagger flew through the air, sinking into Lust's shoulder.

"What the fuck, Greed?" Lust yanked the blade free, glaring at Greed as he stepped forward, aggression rolling off him in waves. "You want to brawl, brother?" He shrugged his suit jacket off, eyes flashing as he roughly rolled up his shirtsleeves. "Let's go."

"Lust, stand down." Wrath stepped in front of his brother, checking him with his massive body. "Either stay and be useful or take this trivial nonsense elsewhere."

"Greed threw his House dagger at me; that's not trivial nonsense. I'm here doing him a favor. I could be well into debauchery and drink instead of listening to cursed skulls and Sloth's less-than-scintillating observations."

"You're still standing here. Which means Greed didn't hit anything vital." Wrath turned to Greed, not giving Lust a chance to respond. "Where did you find Vesta's body?"

A beat of silence passed before Greed responded. "In her bathing chamber. She'd finished training and was cleaning up before our

dinner meeting. When she didn't arrive, I knew something was wrong. Vesta was never late to anything." He strode over to the tumbler he'd left on his desk and gulped the liquid down. Almost faster than I could process, he threw the glass against the wall, watching it shatter. "Vesta was special. There is never going to be another like her. You *know* who did this. She even placed rubies in the skull's eyes to send a message. On honor of my House, I demand a blood retribution. If you do not grant me this, then House Greed declares you and yours an enemy."

Wrath slowly turned to me. "Emilia."

His quiet tone, the way Lust and Sloth suddenly found the invisible lint on their suits to be interesting, the hard stare coming from Greed. The insistence it was a werewolf. They were laying out the evidence. Against my sister.

I wasn't entirely sure what their blood retribution entailed, but I couldn't let them harm Vittoria without more facts. At the same time, I knew we didn't need Greed to be openly at war with us.

Wrath glanced at me, his expression now the cold mask of a ruling prince of Hell, before turning back to his brother. "Sloth, what is the probability a beast other than a shifter inflicted those wounds?"

"Slim. I don't have exact percentages, but it's highly unlikely another creature breached the walls or wards surrounding the castle without first being noticed. Now, a shifter who can cross realms magically would have a much better chance at transporting themselves into these walls."

"And Envy said the abomination had no trouble getting through his wards," Greed added. "She made it all the way to his private wing, where she put on quite a show, but Envy suspected her taking Alexei so publicly was a ruse to keep him distracted. There's no telling what nasty trick she was up to. He's been searching to see if anything was stolen but hasn't reported anything."

"I doubt Envy would be so forthcoming if he did find something missing," Sloth said.

I shook my head—was that enough evidence to confirm my sister was to blame? I turned to Greed. "Vittoria had an alliance with you. Why would she attack your House? What were the terms of your agreement?"

Greed didn't appear inclined to answer my question, but Wrath gave him a hard look that had him rethinking ignoring his soon-to-be queen. I let the slight roll off me for now, though I wouldn't tolerate such disrespectful behavior a second time.

"Your sister wanted an ally in the Seven Circles for reasons I will not disclose in front of rival demon courts. Part of the terms included a vow to not harm any wolves. Something that seemed fair since she'd

already formed an alliance with them and demanded the same from them in return. I was interested in the idea of taming such beasts. Seeing what they might offer. We are normally at odds, so it was an interesting gamble to take."

"It doesn't sound as if Vittoria would have cause to make you an enemy." I looked him over. "Why would she go back on her word? You keep mentioning how special Vesta was, but if you're not inclined to share with us *how* she was special—aside from her battle talents—is that something my sister would have discovered?"

"I do not deign to act as if I understand the way Vittoria's twisted mind works. Your sister likely found out I was acting as a spy for Wrath and took her revenge. I imagine it's that simple."

I glanced at my prince, unable to hide my surprise. "You were having him spy on my twin?"

"I wanted eyes on any potential threat to you." Wrath didn't sound or look sorry.

"You see?" Greed said. "Even your betrothed knows to keep a careful watch on her. She is a vengeful, spiteful wretch." Greed looked ready to exact some vengeance of his own as he leveled his glare at me. "She sent the hexed skull to taunt us. She not only murdered, she *maimed* my third beyond recognition. Your sister needs to meet her maker for her crimes. And if my brother does not sanction her death, then I will come for you and your family, and I will not stop until the last drop of her tainted blood has been wiped from this realm. Vittoria took from me, and now I will return the favor to make us even."

My heart stuttered. Yes, the evidence was damning, but anyone could have made it appear that way. "You cannot—" I moved away from the princes, needing a second to think. "The skull, it didn't sound like my twin."

"And how would you know what her enchanted skulls are supposed to sound like?" Greed challenged. "Has she sent threats to House Wrath, too?"

I spun around, hope filling my veins as I looked to Wrath. Vittoria had admitted to me earlier that she'd sent me at least one enchanted skull. I wasn't sure if Wrath wished to share this House secret, but he didn't offer any indication for me to keep it to myself.

"I recently received enchanted skulls, but they weren't threats. And each skull always sounded eerily like her. This one does not. She also never sent a skull with rubies before." I met Wrath's gaze. "We still have the skulls, correct? We'll fetch them and bring them here, and everyone can listen."

"That doesn't prove a thing," Greed argued. "She could have easily had someone else speak the rhyme in this instance. Maybe she did it to plant a seed of doubt. Besides, the rubies are a stone she's

widely known for."

"All the more reason to think someone could have framed her."

"Who?" Greed challenged.

"Is there anyone who would want to harm Vesta?" I shot back. "Anyone who'd wish to harm *you* by attacking her? And how are you so certain the remains belong to your third?" I asked Greed, gaining the attention of each prince again. "There's not much left that's identifiable. Aside from finding the remains in her chamber, how do you know it's Vesta and not one of her attendants? Or how do you know the sex for that matter?"

"I—" Greed paced around his desk. He looked to Sloth. "You tested the blood?"

"I did, but there were a couple of different profiles—demon and werewolf—that made identification difficult, though werewolf was the strongest scent. Not unsurprising given the content of their blood typically reads stronger than that of any other creature. And Lady Emilia is correct; I couldn't determine the sex."

"Which means you cannot know with certainty that Vesta is dead and not simply kidnapped or gone of her own free will." I looked directly at Sloth. "Correct?"

Sloth blew out a slow breath. "Correct, though I believe unlikely."

"And what of the werewolf blood?" I asked Greed. "Why would the commander of your army have anything other than demon blood show up?"

Greed scowled. "I imagine that could be from her attacker. Further proving the werewolves acted on your twin's behalf."

"You cannot know for certain who acted on who's command. That's pure conjecture. If you're to condemn my sister"—I faced Wrath again, speaking directly to him—"I should hope you'd do so based on facts, not simply the likelihood of her guilt. You say the rubies are something she's widely known for, but then anyone with that knowledge could easily frame her. Including Greed."

"You overstep, Shadow Witch." Greed's voice was a low growl.

"If you have nothing to hide, this conjecture shouldn't offend you, your highness. The skulls she sent me recently did not contain any rubies. It's rather odd that yours did. If I were you and seeking the truth, I'd be very curious about Vesta and what she was doing in the hours leading up to her death. Did anyone hear anything unusual or see anything strange outside her chamber?"

"No," Greed said curtly.

"Was Vesta at odds with anyone in court?" I pressed.

The prince of this circle gave me a nasty look. "She was the commander of my army. Talented beyond measure and focused on her duty. She had little interest in pleasing anyone at court. She was

meant to be feared, not adored."

"With all due respect, your highness, someone made it past her private defenses and overtook her. If she could be so easily harmed, then who's to say the same couldn't happen to you?" I glanced around the room, but no one—except Wrath—met my stare.

"My brother already determined that the most likely creature to break our wards and enter her rooms undetected was a shifter." Greed motioned toward Sloth, who inclined his head. "Your abysmal sister has taken one such creature as her lover. She clearly wishes to incite an internal war. Why else would she go to the trouble of forming an alliance she had no intention of honoring? You need to come to terms with the truth and stop putting the innocent on trial. Vesta is dead. Your sister is responsible. That's the end of it. Your mortal sentimentality is clearly clouding your ability to see the obvious."

My sister might be guilty of horrible things, but she was my blood. I would fight for her until I knew the full truth. And that was something that ought to be done for anyone accused of such a serious crime. The fact that Greed was content with leading what could only be described as a witch hunt, without any true proof of guilt, was appalling. How his brothers could stand here, entertaining it, was maddening. I felt my betrothed's attention on me and turned to him.

Wrath's gaze was penetrating as it held mine. And wholly unreadable. Something like dread crept into my belly the longer he held my stare. This wasn't my future husband staring deeply into my eyes; it was the demon fearsome enough to rule them all.

Greed moved around his desk, planting his hands on either side of the dagger he'd just retrieved after flinging it at Lust. "What's your decision, brother? Do you declare war on House Greed or the monstrosity your intended calls a sister?"

A flicker of something cold and calculating in Wrath's expression made me want to drop to my knees and beg for mercy, but I forced myself to maintain eye contact with him, keeping my own emotions locked away. He seemed on the verge of making his decision, so I spoke for my twin once more. "A general and a king must make the tough decisions, even when unpopular. Judgment, in order to be fair, must be based on facts. Not emotions."

A muscle in his jaw clenched.

Wrath didn't look at any of his brothers when he said, "By attacking a member of House Greed, causing severe bodily harm and death, Vittoria Nicoletta di Carlo has openly declared war on the Seven Circles, and as such, she is now considered an enemy of the realm. If she is seen anywhere in any circle, each prince of Hell may act as he deems fit to ensure the safety of his people. House Wrath hereby accepts House Greed's request for blood retribution. If any

official member of the seven Houses of Sin is found harboring the condemned without notifying me of her capture, they, too, shall be executed."

I stared at Wrath. I knew I heard him correctly, but I couldn't believe it. I could barely *think* past the sudden ringing in my ears. My betrothed, the demon I'd been about to complete an eternal marriage bond with, just sentenced my twin to death. His brothers murmured their approval, and I glared at them all as rage simmered. They had no facts. No evidence, no proof of guilt.

"I'll have the blood oath written up." Greed nodded to someone I didn't care to look at. "It may take a while since we'll need to use language acceptable to Houses Lust, Sloth, Greed, and Wrath. For now, please accept a guest suite to rest in or enjoy one of our many gaming halls."

Wrath nodded and finally turned to me. His expression wasn't one of sorrow or forgiveness. It looked like duty and cold justice. It looked like triumph.

Fury had my vision going nearly red as I dove into Source—a dozen roses burst into flames around the room. Lust and Sloth moved back, a flash of fear crossing their features. Heat from the raging flames had sweat breaking out across their brows.

It was the first time my magic actually produced fire with the ability to cause damage. And it was fitting, because I wanted to watch them burn. Fire crackled and popped, needing a place to go, to destroy.

I glanced at the painting Lust had been standing by, and my magic responded at once, each rosebud crashing into the canvas, setting it ablaze.

Greed shouted a command, and a demon stepped forward, grabbing a pitcher of water from the sideboard. He needn't bother. I silently bid the flames to retreat, meeting each of their wide gazes as the scent of charred canvas permeated the air. Perhaps my sister had been right. Maybe it was time for the demons to fear us for a change.

"Apologies, my temper got the best of me."

I gripped my skirts and spun on my heels, following the trembling attendant out of the room. I had just gotten my sister back, and it would be the coldest day Hell had ever known before I allowed any harm to befall her. Deceitful, conniving wretch that she was, she was *my* blood, and I'd protect her with each drop of mine whether she deserved my loyalty or not.

FIVE

“**I won’t ask** you to not scheme,” Wrath said once we were tucked into our guest chamber and he’d thrown a ward up to keep our conversation private. “Only to use caution.”

“How could you—*what*?”

I immediately stopped pacing and spun around, staring. I could hardly believe he was telling me to disregard his royal command. He looked at me intently, and it was then I knew; he’d been scheming himself. I thought back to his careful wording: *If any official member of the seven Houses of Sin is found harboring the condemned without notifying me of her capture, they, too, shall be executed*. Wrath was well aware that, without our marriage completed, I was not yet officially a member of any House of Sin, and his royal decree didn’t apply to me at all.

My eyes burned with unshed tears. For better or worse, he was my partner and had been guarding my interests. Except this decree did complicate one aspect: he’d not be able to directly assist in my investigation himself, or he’d break his oath. All my ire drained away.

“Your brothers will want your head if they discover your treacherous negotiation.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” His smile was predatory. “Nor will it be the last. You forget, their anger will only fuel my power more. I welcome their attempts at war.”

I strode over and hugged him tight. His arms automatically went around me, embracing me back, and I sighed happily. “You are one cunning, magnificent demon. And I’m pleased you’re mine. Even if I did just wish to strangle you.”

“Or incinerate me?” Wrath sounded pleased instead of worried by my show of power.

"I'm sorry if that lapse of control will cause a complication for you."

"It won't. And even if it did, I rather like your anger."

Now that my fury was under control, I focused on what we'd just learned about the murder. Pieces of the story didn't sit well with me, but I couldn't quite determine why. "Do you know anything of Vesta's background?"

"Only that Greed had been searching for her specifically for a few years before she came to his House. We don't often share secrets regarding our closest counsel, so I don't know much else."

"Does Envy?"

Wrath expelled a slow breath, considering. "He might with his spies. But I have my own spies, and they have never uncovered why Greed wanted Vesta to command his armies."

"That's odd, isn't it?"

"Depending on any hidden talents or magic she possessed, it would make sense that he'd covet that. His sin pushes him to acquire things that inspire greed, demons included."

And yet Sloth had mentioned there were a couple of different types of blood.

"*Was* she a demon?"

"I have no reason to believe otherwise." Wrath rested his chin against my head before pressing a kiss to it. "What are you thinking?"

"That perhaps she was something other than a full demon. Why else wouldn't Greed expand on why she was so special and couldn't be replaced? And why was there so much werewolf blood?"

"During a fight that brutal, blood would have been left by the assailants as well as the victim."

"I understand that. But Vesta was ripped to shreds. Even if she harmed a wolf severely, she would have lost the most blood—*demon* blood…"

"It's a valid point. But the potency of werewolf blood overwhelms our senses. Similar to the scent of a strong astringent. If you smell ammonia, then try to pick out any notes underneath it, the ammonia will always dominate."

"Blood and bones. All one has to do to get away with murder is splash some werewolf blood around the scene."

"Which is part of the reason werewolves want nothing to do with demons and vampires. They used to be hunted for that very reason."

My lip curled in disgust. No wonder the wolves despised vampires and demons.

Putting that gruesome piece of history aside, I thought of other viable options for the case at hand. "If we spoke with Vesta's family, perhaps we might learn information about who might want to harm

her. Who she might have spent time with away from Greed, when she wasn't training his army. If we know what she did outside of her duties, we might have a solid thread to follow."

"I'll see what I can find out when I sign the oath." He ran a hand down my spine in slow, loving strokes. "Speaking of that. We'll need to find an excuse for you to miss the blood oath later. If you sign that document, even my scheming won't matter."

I rested my head against his chest, thinking. "Well, they certainly know I was furious with you when we left. What if we go down to one of the gaming halls and I happen to drink one too many demonberry wines? I won't get truly intoxicated, and if I do, you can magic it away like you did when you tested me for gluttony. I'll make a terrible scene, and you can encourage me to go back to our rooms and sleep it off. We'll simply have to convincingly playact in front of one of your brothers so they can vouch for us."

Wrath drew back to look me in the eye. "If you make a scene, it will have to be debauched enough to draw attention in a gaming hall in a House of Sin. It will truly have to cause a scandal worthy of notice, and that will be extremely difficult here. Short of destroying part of the castle, or unleashing another sin, I'm not sure it's possible. Are you up for that challenge?"

He was asking *me* the question, but I had the sense *he* was also wondering the same thing about himself. But maybe *that* was the key. I thought back to Greed's receiving hall while we waited for our escorts, and a wicked idea sprang to mind. I was fairly confident I could create quite the stir. And my betrothed's legendary temper would help to ensure that.

I didn't have to cause a scandal; I only needed to light Wrath's fuse.

"Go find Lust or Sloth in a gaming hall and send word to me of where you are. You can plant the seeds of giving me space to cool off, and I'll make my grand entrance."

"I don't—"

"You need to trust me, Samael." Whispering his true name made him go perfectly still. I trusted him, knowing his truth. It was time for him to return the favor. "You need to be just as affected by my performance as everyone else. If you know my plan ahead of time, it will not only ruin the surprise, but it will also make it impossible for you to lie about it. Now go." I rolled up onto my toes and kissed him quickly before pushing him toward the door. "And please have a lady's maid sent up at once."

I strode into the darkened gaming hall, swaying my hips a bit more than necessary as I snatched a glass of demonberry wine from a passing tray. I took a slow sip, my painted lips curving seductively, as I scanned the room. Felt-covered card tables lined the perimeter and were packed with lords and ladies of this circle. All the wood furnishings were dark, elegantly carved, and plush enough to entice gamblers to sit and stay awhile. Alcohol and food also made frequent rounds, ensuring demons didn't have to leave their seats for any refreshments.

The carpet was ornate if one took the time to admire it, but it also blended into the dark, enchanting feeling of the gaming hall. Torches flickered softly from each corner, creating a comfortable ambience. Greed clearly wanted patrons to forget the world outside of this House of Sin. Near the center of the chamber was a prominent stage with a few demons slowly stripping off clothing. Several small tables were placed in front of it, offering patrons an opportunity to sit and watch the sultry show. It was mostly empty, save for a few demons drinking alone at the foot of the stage. If my first idea didn't pan out, that stage might be a perfect second option.

Toward the right was a long, gleaming bar that featured towers of liquor bottles and wines, all ready for consumption. Just as I'd suspected, I felt the first licks of Greed's power bolster my actions. I desired attention, and therefore, those who were happy to oblige were drawn to me. Instead of shrugging off the magic, I welcomed it, used it as fuel for my secret mission.

Wrath had walked into Greed's study with confidence, so I adopted his demeanor and behaved the same way, even if my heart was racing.

I spied my mark at a serious-looking table where they were throwing dice, and I paused to survey the occupants before they spotted me. The demons seated around him all seemed particularly refined, and I hoped that meant they were upper nobility. Aside from creating a scene, I needed to inquire after someone who knew Vesta. It wasn't simply enough to eliminate my twin as a suspect, I wanted to know the truth. Greed seemed to have made up his mind about Vittoria awfully quickly, which I found suspicious even if the other princes didn't.

I made my way over to Lust, enjoying the feeling of the pearl tassels swinging against the back of my thighs. As far as skirts went, this was barely considered that. There was no fabric, only hundreds of strands of pearls that barely reached midthigh. I had nothing on underneath, so each step and extra flounce of my hips ensured patrons got quite the show. My top was equally daring. Featuring a choker that had strings of pearls connected to the straps and cups, it was

really no more than a half corset made up entirely of gemstones that left very little to the imagination when I moved.

Nudity wasn't scandalous here, but Wrath's reaction to what I had planned should get demons in this circle talking. I knew the moment Wrath spotted me across the crowd of gamblers—his attention was scorching, palpable. I ignored him completely and sidled up to Lust. The temperature around us chilled a degree or two, but I still didn't spare my betrothed a glance. He had his part to play, and I had mine. My sister's life might very well depend on whether I could avoid signing that blood oath and gather information to clear her from guilt.

"Having any luck, your highness?" I leaned over the felt table next to Lust, knowing anyone standing close would get a clear view of my backside and a glimpse of my breasts as they moved against the pearls. Predictably, Lust allowed his attention to linger everywhere it shouldn't.

I sensed the slightest bit of his sin, though it felt as if he were keeping it at bay. He truly did fear his brother. I supposed a House dagger to the chest left quite the impression. An inconvenience I'd have to overcome. Wrath and I both needed Lust's sin for this scene to work.

"Seems it just turned." He flashed a smile, then looked back at the table. Next to him, a male demon with an exceptional amount of gold stole a glance at me. On his right hand was what appeared to be a signet ring. He had to be upper nobility, which made him perfect for this game.

I gave him a coy smile as I leaned into Lust. "Who's your friend?"

Lust drew back from his roll and followed my gaze. "The Duke of Devon. One of Greed's top advisers."

My smile grew. "Pleasure to meet you, your grace. I'm—"

"There's not a demon in here that doesn't know who you are, Lady Emilia." Devon grinned. Too bad for him it actually seemed sincere. "Have you ever played Dead Man's Pride?"

I watched another demon blow on the dice and toss them down the table. "I'm not much for playing games of chance."

His attention flicked over my top, his look indicating he might be intrigued to know if I preferred a different sort of game instead. "Would you care to indulge me?"

I would rather gouge my eyes out. "I'll just watch for now. Perhaps, if you're talented enough, your grace can persuade me otherwise."

Wrath's annoyance caused the air to chill slightly again.

I squeezed between Lust and the duke, purposely brushing my hip against the latter's arm. I turned to Lust and whispered loud enough for Devon to overhear. "Earlier you said something about a present

from House Lust." I sipped my wine, then discarded it before grabbing another full glass. No one seemed to notice I hadn't completely finished the previous one. I leaned closer to Lust and dropped my voice. "You've piqued my curiosity. Is it like your last gift, or will I actually enjoy it?"

"Oh, it's *much* better." Lust fully turned to me, his game forgotten as he took my measure. Whatever he saw in my face must have been convincing enough for him to decide to play. "I can give pleasure without taking. Would you like a little taste?"

"Here?" I glanced toward the duke. He was pretending not to listen, but as he leaned forward in his seat, he seemed quite eager to hear the response.

The Prince of Lust nodded to the stage where several demons danced in various states of undress. One male—who wore nothing but the gems on his member—slowly stroked himself, seeming to enjoy the greedy gazes on him. Another male beside him whispered something in his ear, then bent to take his hard arousal in his mouth, pleasuring the other demon for all to see.

Lust watched me closely. "You could join them up there, experience the power of two sins at once. Those body adornments they wear enhance every sensation. Imagine how those pearls would feel as they slid over sensitive flesh, hitting areas of pleasure inside you never dreamed of."

I tore my attention back to Lust and flicked it over the Duke of Devon. "I'd prefer to stay here, actually. Could you still give me a taste, or will that distract from the game?"

The mighty chill of Wrath's anger hit me like a storm a second before he reached my side, and judging from the way several gamblers at the table staggered away and abandoned their game and stack of coins, I wasn't the only one who'd felt it.

Warm fingers brushed along my wrist. "Emilia."

"Don't." Even though my body screamed otherwise, I shrugged him off. "I'm in the middle of a *pleasurable* conversation with people who didn't condemn my twin." I turned my attention to the duke and gave him a polite smile. "Prince Wrath, please say hello to the Duke of Devon."

Wrath flashed his teeth. "Fuck off, Devon."

"Easy now." Lust grinned at his brother. "Keep that up and Lady Emilia will experience three sins at once."

"Not if I cut off your goddamn head and serve it to my hounds." Wrath managed to scare off another gambler. Thankfully, the duke wasn't to be deterred. The goddess must have been watching over me, because Devon's preferred form of this court's sin was attention, and our little show was feeding his form of greed expertly.

I finally met Wrath's furious stare. Goddess above he was something magnificent to behold when he let his magic out of its cage. He was playing his role expertly. Soon he'd go feral, and I couldn't wait for that beastly part of him to finally be unleashed.

"If you'll excuse me. I've experienced enough of *some* sins for one evening. Please go back to your own table." I caught myself before I lied, knowing Lust would sense it as easily as Wrath. I faced Lust, but purposely looked at Devon when I said, "Will you give me a taste now? Or must I wait?"

Lust slid his attention from where Wrath still hovered behind me, then leaned in. "It looks like if you get your gift now," he murmured close to my ear, "you may incite a riot."

"A risk I'm willing to take." I stumbled into the duke and allowed him to steady me with one hand splayed a bit too low on my back. The moment he touched me, Lust's sin enveloped me. I'd been ready for it, though, so I drew the power to me, used it as an extension of what I wanted instead of allowing it to overrun me.

The Duke of Devon quickly dropped his hand, but the sensation of being touched didn't abate. Lust's sin felt as it did the first time I'd experienced it—like invisible hands were on me, dancing up along my body. Only this time the invisible hands were bolder, likely the result of being in Greed's House of Sin and openly desiring attention.

Music I hadn't noticed before grew louder, the drumbeats urgent and primal. Carnal. It was time to put my plan into motion. I dropped onto Devon's lap, earning a surprised huff from him, though the duke was only too pleased to have me perched there like a prize he'd done nothing to win but was more than happy to show off.

His chest brushed against my back as he leaned in, "Your companion won't murder me, will he?"

"Unlikely, your grace. Not when we were asked here to investigate a murder."

The magical hands Lust had gifted me with wasted no time with seduction; they slid over the front of my body and inched downward. With that magical sensation moving all over me, it was going to be wildly hard to concentrate on gathering information, but it would be rather easy for the second part of my scheme.

I leaned against the duke as those wicked invisible hands continued their slow, tantalizing path across the swath of bare skin that ranged from just under my breasts to my navel then stroked upward again. The magic was like a drop of liquid heat rolling up and down my neck, between my breasts, circling their peaks as it continued languidly stroking me.

I slowly slid down the duke's thigh, my attention split between the action and reaction I sensed coming from a different point in the

room.

"It's a shame what happened to her, isn't it?" I asked.

"You mean Vesta?" Devon's breath caught with the next shift of my body.

"Yes," I whispered breathlessly, eyes still closed. Goddess curse Lust's power. It was too good. "Did you know her?"

Another lick of heat that had nothing to do with Lust's magic-fueled desire had me cracking an eye. Wrath had commandeered a seat on the opposite side of the gaming table, his hard, burning gaze fixed on me and the duke, whose knee I was grinding against.

I gave my betrothed a secret smile. Having Wrath there, watching, made it feel as if he were the only one in the room with me. It was *his* attention I desired above all, *his* greedy hunger I wanted to ignite. His fury. I longed for him so desperately, so deeply, I ached. What we'd shared in the gondola wasn't nearly enough, and the greedy desire I'd felt for him came rushing back, mixing dangerously with Lust's gift.

"I knew Vesta a little," Devon said, answering a question I nearly forgotten I'd asked. If I had any hopes of keeping my wits, I needed to stop looking at Wrath while Lust's sin worked me. "She seemed distracted as of late."

"How so?"

Lust's soft chuckle sounded to my left, followed by a stronger wave of his magic. The demon bastard was going to kill me with pleasure or help to incite the riot he'd warned me against. A soft, breathy moan escaped my lips. Goddess above, everything felt *so* good. The pearls of my skirt hit interesting places as I rolled my hips again, searching for more of that glorious feeling. The duke swore roundly when he noticed what I was doing, but he kept his hands on the card table where Wrath could see them.

My attention locked onto the demon prince again as euphoria swept through me. I wanted to be on *his* lap, riding him until we were both sated. Wrath gripped the arms of his chair as if he were holding himself back. I wasn't sure if it was anger or desire that had his attention riveted to my show. I didn't care. This game we were playing just turned more interesting.

"Your grace?" I managed to ask between invisible strokes. "You mentioned Vesta seeming distracted. Do you recall how?"

"She'd—" The duke shifted in his seat beneath me. "She lost several games. It was unusual enough for the court to start talking. Vesta never lost focus. I even heard she'd been asking odd questions lately, about scenting blood and the intricacies of it."

"I was under the impression all demons could detect information in blood."

"That's precisely why some were growing curious about her. She'd

assign a guard to test any blood disputes during skirmishes. An odd amount of werewolf blood kept tainting the scenes."

Which would certainly enrage any werewolves whose blood had been taken, giving possible credence to Greed's suspicion of them being responsible for the attack. "Did anyone ever mention this to Greed?"

"His highness punished anyone who brought up Vesta in any negative light. Everything I've heard has all been the result of court gossip."

I inadvertently slid down the Duke of Devon's lap as he adjusted himself again, immediately feeling what he'd been hiding. His arousal. I quickly moved away from it, but not before a low growl sounded from across the table. Wrath looked close to launching himself at the duke, every muscle in his body appeared strained, and his stubborn will was probably the only thing keeping him in check. Goddess above he was incredible. Thanks to the heady combination of greed and lust mixing with Wrath's sinful allure, I wanted him to lay me down on the gaming table, spread my legs, and own me right here and now.

My king swallowed hard, his gaze darkening, and I realized he sensed *my* arousal. At first, I wasn't certain if he could tell the difference between who had turned me on—it certainly wasn't the duke. I only desired my favorite sin, but with the amount of anger radiating off him, I realized he'd misjudged. It seemed our performance was very close to finally causing a scene. It was time to gather any other information I could before Wrath lost control.

"Was anything else unusual about Vesta before her death?" I asked. "How are her family members taking it?"

"No… no family." The Duke of Devon's breathing turned erratic when my hands skimmed along the front of my top. "Vesta wasn't originally from this circle. Prince Greed kept that a secret that only he and Vesta were supposed to know, but word travels in court. For the right price. Vesta wasn't her given name, according to gossips."

Interesting. "Do you know what her name was?"

"No. She never spoke of it."

"And she was alone at court?"

The duke flicked his tongue over his lips. "Vesta had dalliances over the years, nothing that took her away from her duty. Some believed Greed wanted to make her his consort, but he's always denied that and so has she."

"Did they ever"—I ran my fingertips along my outer thighs —"have relations?"

Wrath's hands flexed. And the sudden thought of him pleasuring himself while watching me do the same made me forget this was supposed to be a scheme. All I wanted was him. And greed took over.

The Duke of Devon began stroking my outer arms, and I wondered if Lust had sent him a little encouragement or if it was simply greed driving him to participate in my show.

"Vesta typically preferred the company of females. Though she was known to sleep with the occasional male if she desired him."

"Have you heard anything else that would be interesting?"

"I'd rather not think of anything else at the moment, Lady Emilia." The duke leaned over my shoulder, his attention locked on my fingers as they traveled under my skirt and I—

The temperature plummeted. Startled cries sounded from the stage. I glanced over in time to see what had happened. Ice shot across the stage, and gyrating couples slipped but didn't fall. We were getting very close to creating a scene now, but it still wasn't enough to make an impression on this court. Wrath needed to lose control. Embrace the devil he was.

I pushed myself up from the duke's lap and perched against the gaming table, my back to Wrath as I slowly kicked one leg up and over to the other, crossing my legs primly and effectively drawing Devon's hungry stare. My wineglass rattled then cracked, spilling wine over the table.

The Duke of Devon didn't notice. His greedy attention had finally been captured in its entirety. He undid the stays on his trousers and yanked himself free, then stroked his length as the remaining players at our table turned to him, indulging in his sin. My attention remained fixed on his, though I was truly focused on the massive presence behind us.

A low rumble rolled through the gaming hall, not disturbing enough to stop the gambling or the greed-fueled tableaus, but enough to have drinks splashing onto the card tables. I sent a silent prayer to the goddess, hoping Wrath would act soon. I'd already heard more than enough from Devon. The duke stood and stroked himself harder, groaning as if he was getting close to his release. Lords and ladies at our table hungrily leaned in, feeding into his desire to be watched.

"Lady Emilia," Devon groaned. "Touch your—"

"Enough."

Wrath's voice was barely more than a whisper, yet the hair along my arms stood on end. Power pulsed in the air around us like a storm was about to hit. That was the only warning anyone received. And then it happened; a thunderous crack rent the air, silencing the drumbeats. The duke standing before me froze, a look of confusion quickly turning to fear as he dropped his cock and jumped back, narrowly missing a chunk of ceiling that crashed before him. Bits of plaster rained down, falling in a circle around me, protecting me from the impending chaos.

I drew my attention up—lines spiderwebbed across the ceiling, the cracks growing until it crumbled. Wood splintered, crystal chandeliers rattled, the stage started caving in on itself as if the ground was swallowing it whole. Demons shouted and abandoned their sex shows as they rushed for safety. I sat in the center of my impenetrable ring, watching as gaming table after gaming table was suddenly coated in ice, heavy and thick enough to break and shatter the ornate wood.

"Blood and bones." Our game had worked. Maybe too well.

A table nearby disintegrated. Another quickly following. All around the gaming hall, furniture exploded into dust or was coated in ice that was so heavy it broke all it touched into shards. My table remained undamaged, the one speck of calm in the storm of wrath.

Wrath's fury was demolishing the entire room, piece by piece. My breath came out in white clouds, the temperature now dangerously below freezing. It was as if we'd crossed into a world made entirely of ice; it was cruel and harsh and lethal. Just like the look on my prince's face when he turned that wrathful gaze on the duke. I shuddered. And Devon promptly pissed himself.

Then Wrath was truly there, tossing me over his shoulder like a barbarian, his large hand covering my backside as he carried me from the destroyed chamber.

He was practically vibrating from the pressure of holding back his power. I couldn't imagine what else he could do, what else he could destroy, if this was only a taste of his magic.

My attention landed on Lust, who was chuckling in the chaos. Recalling our game, I began pounding on Wrath's back. "Put me down!"

The demon prince didn't respond, not that I expected him to. Wrath was focused only on his sin as he swiftly removed us from the gaming hall, where shouts were still ringing out and the violent, unnatural blizzard swirled within that chamber. Snowflakes kissed my bare skin, so cold they felt like little nips. Wrath truly was a force of nature.

Using supernatural speed, he had us back in our room before I knew it.

He gently set me on my feet and paced away, his fury lashing out. I hid my grin. Our plan worked beautifully. Wrath's sin had ruined one of Greed's gaming rooms, and we got information on Vesta. Overall, it was a wild success. Though the poor duke would claim otherwise.

"Well?" I asked. "Do you think it was a believable scene?"

It had to be—Vittoria's life depended on it.

Wrath slowly turned from where he'd magicked the room to

conceal our voices, his attention raking over me. He did, indeed, look like a feral animal whose leash just snapped and was testing for any new cage. My heartbeat quickened, and not in fear. I'd wished to provoke him into action. And he certainly looked primed and ready to act. His arousal strained against his trousers, and the way he was staring at me, like he'd devote himself to wringing pleasure from my body for hours on end, made me ache for him all over again.

"Did you enjoy the show, your majesty?" Holding his gaze, I pivoted in place, making sure the pearl tassels swished against my backside. "You could have at least allowed the poor duke to finish. The nobility at the table was enjoying his performance."

"Emilia." It didn't sound like a warning as much as a plea. One more step, and he'd be as gone as I was.

"Was I wicked enough to fool a prince of Hell?" I ran my hands over my barely there top, allowing one strap to fall down. "Better yet… was I wicked enough to entice the devil?"

Wrath cursed gods I'd never heard of as I sauntered closer. He looked like he was a breath away from pouncing. I practically felt the tension snapping between us, and I leaned into it.

Wrath took a small step toward me, his gaze locked onto mine. The hunter had come out to play. "Tell me you want this."

My attention ran over him, slowly and thoroughly. I hadn't forgotten that anger acted as an aphrodisiac to him. Hadn't forgotten how it also made me feel.

"Right now, I want the demon, not the prince. Show me why they call you the Wicked." I grabbed his shirt and tugged him to me, my lips hovering above his. "And don't you dare hold back."

SIX

Wrath had me against the wall before I drew my next breath. He fingered the pearls of my top, his breath hot against the back of my neck as he roughly ground his hips against me. “If you change your mind—”

I spun around and cut him off with a violent kiss. “Stop again, even for a *second*, and I promise we’ll test your fondness for knife play, demon.”

Wrath’s answering smile promised deviance. He gently stroked my breasts over the pearl top until they grew heavy and ached for more.

“This top.” His fingers curled around a strand, his warm, bare skin *almost* brushing mine. I never hated a piece of clothing more. “Needs to go.”

The prince’s grip tightened on the strand, and he yanked, the pearls bouncing across the floor as my top broke apart. He allowed his gaze to slowly peruse my eyes, my lips, and every inch of my body until he’d reached the floor and dragged it back up. I loved when he looked at me like that. Like I was the beginning and end of each of his fantasies. He certainly was mine.

“You are absolutely devastating.” He dipped his head, kissing his way down my neck, not stopping until he’d cupped one of my breasts and sucked it into his mouth, his teeth scraping ever so lightly. I leaned against the wall, my hands traveling down his powerful arms, holding him close as he lathed his tongue over the sensitive peak.

“Wrath.” I writhed against him, unable to stand the slow, expert flicking of his tongue. My body was drenched and ready. “I want you. So bad I can’t think straight.”

He pressed openmouthed kisses to my other breast, laughing quietly as I gripped his hair and held on. “When I saw you on that

idiot's lap, soaking wet and nearly coming, I wanted to fuck you right there. In front of the whole damned court."

The way he growled, low and rough like his very un-princelike words, set my blood on fire. I pressed against him, needing to feel him as I went up on my toes and whispered, "I would have let you."

Wrath's lips crashed against mine, the kiss neither sweet nor tender. It was animalistic and wild. A claiming and battle for domination. Tonight, we'd complete the physical part of our marriage bond, and Wrath did not want a submissive queen. He longed for an equal. Just as I did.

I broke away from our kiss, then licked up the column of his throat, pleased when he released a string of curses and roughly ground his hips against mine again, his length as hard as granite. He buried his face in my neck, kissing and sucking until a breath hissed out of me.

He drew back and brushed a loose strand of hair away from my face, like he was checking to make sure this was real. "I spent that whole time thinking about what I'd like to do." One large, calloused hand traveled along my left side, slowly sliding over my hip, down my thigh, until he reached the back of my knee and hoisted me up against him. "Imagining how you'd feel. The sounds you'd make. When I murdered that bastard, spread your legs, and pounded into you. Right there on that fucking table."

His tantalizing words, the heat and desire in his eyes. It was too much.

"Please. I need you inside me. Now." I ripped at the stays of his trousers, slipped my hand inside the material, and began to play.

"Emilia."

My name on his lips, the reverence of his tone—it awakened something in me. A feeling so strong I could only express it with action. I sucked his bottom lip between my teeth, biting down gently, and stroked him faster. His skin was as soft as silk, but his arousal was stronger than steel.

This magnificent, deadly creature was *mine*. I would commit ugly, savage acts if anyone interrupted me from claiming him right here, right now.

"Emilia, demon's blood." He thrusted a few times into my grip before tearing his pants off, his shirt following in rapid succession. Wrath spun me around, placing my hands against the wall. "Keep your legs close together and lean forward."

"Yes, General." I did as he commanded, my body already slick and ready.

"Smart ass."

I grinned at him over my shoulder as he grabbed a handful of my

bottom, the move pure possession as he playfully squeezed it. “Perhaps you should punish me.”

“Is that a request?” His eyes flared with desire as I nodded. “Tell me when you’ve had enough, my lady.”

He parted the strands of pearls and gripped my hips, angling me up. He pressed himself against my entrance, and my body went hot and tight from the erotic feel of it. He teased me, sliding his length back and forth across my slickness. I arched against him, silently pleading. He rubbed against me harder, pressed a little deeper, but only nudged the tip in. I swore roundly and went to push myself onto him, but he pulled back, sliding across my core again. And again. And again. Until I was practically panting and crawling up the wall with need.

“Wrath. Please. Fuck me.”

“As my queen commands.” With a single, fierce thrust, the demon was fully seated inside me. He gave me a moment to adjust to the feeling of him, my body stretching not unpleasantly. He leaned his weight against me, kissing the back of my neck, nipping at my earlobe as he slid out, then in, going deeper. And deeper. “Tell me now.”

“What?” The breathless, sultry voice barely sounded like mine.

Wrath repeated the motion, no longer for me to adjust to his size, but to slowly torture me to death from the pleasure. On his next deliciously slow thrust, he hit a bundle of nerves that drew a moan from me. He brushed his lips against my ear. “That I am your favorite sin.”

He pulled my backside toward him, pushing me down a little more, finding the perfect angles to elicit the most ecstasy. It was a little rough, a bit wild, and intensely primal. I couldn’t imagine a more perfect joining.

“Tell me you’re mine.” Wrath’s passion burned hotter than his sin, and I burned for him. My body tightened around his, my core throbbing, and fire seared my veins. I was his. Forever.

Just as he was mine.

“You are my favorite everything.” I leaned against the wall, pressing back against him, working my hips in time with his deep thrusts. To give as good as I was getting. “You’re *mine*.”

“Fuck, Emilia.” Wrath groaned, one hand now locked on to my hip so he could tug me against him, while the other hand found the front of my body, his fingers playing me like an instrument he was proficient in. It was almost too much, and yet I never wanted the feeling to stop. “You feel like heaven.”

“Goddess curse me. Harder.”

Wrath obliged. He unleashed all of himself, pounding against me so hard the light fixtures began to shake. The painting I’d barely

noticed crashed to the floor.

And then it happened, the past slammed into the present, and a vision overtook me.

In a different demon House, Wrath pressed me against the wall in a darkened corridor, wringing pleasure from my body as he thrusted into me. We'd both torn my clothing entirely off but kept his trousers on. And the idea of him half-clothed drove me wild. My attention was riveted to the hand with the serpent tattoo as it worked my body, bringing me to the brink of climax then slowing down until I was mad with want. He liked to tease, to draw out my pleasure until I took it on my own.

I could hear the sounds of others just outside our secret corridor. At any moment, someone might come upon us. Neither one of us wanted an audience, but balancing on that knife's edge of discovery, the slight bite of fear that came with it, suddenly heightened the experience.

As I came closer to the edge, I noticed a faint glow coming from my hand; a tattoo was beginning to appear along my left ring finger. Wrath thrusted again, deeper and faster—my mind and body were both on the brink of giving in to the pleasure he was demanding.

He bent me over. "Keep your legs together. Closer."

His command and the friction the new position created had me calling his name despite our need for silence. I arched my back, and the demon hit a spot deep within that had me seeing stars. I breathed hard, my attention fixed on the large hand that held my hip. A tattoo had appeared there, too, on Wrath's same ring finger. I smiled, thinking of the words he'd spoken earlier. The eternal vow.

I covered his hand with mine, braiding our fingers as he slammed our bodies together one last time, shuddering and cursing as we both came.

The vision abruptly disappeared, and I was once again in the present. It must not have lasted for long, or else my prince would have noticed. Wrath pulled out, then pushed in, his breathing ragged against my neck. We were both close, our skin damp and hot. I was nearing my release… but I still swore I felt the aftershocks from the climax in my vision, which only heightened my experience now.

"Goddess above. Don't stop."

"Never."

His words were spoken with the promise of a vow. Wrath rubbed my clit in wicked circles, right where he still thrusted into me, and I came violently. A moment later, he joined me with a harsh curse. My legs trembled as he leaned forward and gently kissed my neck.

As I caught my breath, I stared at the tattoos that had now appeared on our fingers in the present, finally making out the words as the light faded into our skin. The letters were written vertically in rose-gold, from just under my nail to where my finger met my hand.

S

E

M

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E

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V

V

S

The words were spelled like Roman inscriptions. It took a moment for me to piece together what the Latin said. *Forever yours*.

Wrath reached around and placed his left hand on mine, revealing the rose-gold ink that now also ran along the entire length of his ring finger. *SEMPER TVVS*.

Past and present collided and, for a moment, I couldn't tell which was which.

"Emilia." His voice was soft, measured. I couldn't stop staring at the tattoo. I gently tugged my hand from under his and sucked in a breath. This was no illusion or past memory; the same phrase really was inked onto my skin in the here and now.

I held up my hand, twisting it around. "Is this because of the marriage bond?"

Wrath pulled free of my body and turned me until I faced him. "Yes. And no. Did you remember something?"

"I… I'm not sure. I saw us. In the past. Just now." I moved to the bed and sat, my gaze locked onto the ink. "We were in a dark corridor, making love. And these same words appeared."

"Do you recall anything else? Anything at all?"

"I had the impression you'd said the words earlier that evening." I rubbed my temples, suddenly feeling unwell. "Dear goddess above. It was *me*. Wasn't it? Not the First Witch. Not Pride's missing wife. Not some reincarnation. *Me.* But… how?"

Wrath crouched before me, his hands resting gently on my knees. His touch was not simply meant to soothe and comfort, but to reinforce. As if he could somehow help break the hold the curse had

on me. The curse. Heart hammering, I squeezed my eyes shut. The curse…

There was something else *there*, something niggling around the edges of my memory. Fuzzy and out of focus. Like opening your eyes while under water. A memory was straining to break free, to fight its way back to me. I opened my eyes and focused on the new ink on my finger.

"Has this always been here? Hidden by a glamour?"

"I have a theory, but…" Wrath's voice trailed off, likely the curse's fault.

"Who am I?" I demanded. The room was spinning. "*What* am I? Do *you* remember?"

It took so long for Wrath to respond that I almost jumped when he spoke.

"For a long time, I didn't. And if I did, the memory would warp."

"And now?" My voice was quiet, tense. "Do you remember who I am?"

Wrath's gold gaze latched on to mine as he slowly nodded. My whole body tensed as I waited. "You are the one she tried to make me hate for eternity. But she failed." His grip on me tightened slightly, but not painfully, like he was never going to give me up. Unless I wished to leave. *"Remember."*

The single word—spoken with authority and pure dominance—kept playing and replaying in my mind, almost spinning wildly like a top out of control. There was something there, in the way he'd commanded me to remember… magic. He'd commanded me through magic.

Wrath was feeding me his power, likely a result of our marriage bond. I sensed the slight trace of Wrath's magic in the air, deep inside me, and gripped onto it, wanting—more than anything—to understand how I could be both enemy and lover. How I could have ever forgotten.

My heart thundered in my chest, too strong, too powerfully. Something was wrestling and fighting within me, something that was snarling and feral—something that wanted to break free. Our power seemed to merge, to braid together, creating new magic. Strong magic. A well of power too enormous to be contained. It was fire and ice and full of rage and passion. Whatever spell or curse or lock that was on my mind cracked. I cried out as magic flooded my system, lighting me up from within.

"Samael." I reached for Wrath, but he was already there, holding me. Offering his strength. He must have sensed the slight fracture in whatever held my memories at bay, and he seized upon it, turning his power into a spear and aiming it for that one opening.

“Tell me who you are.” His voice was filled with that same magical command. *“Remember.”*

It felt as if I were now submerged, struggling to breathe, to think, to fight for air. I gasped, choking. Panic descended, and I was suddenly convinced I was on the edge of death. A warning rang in my head.

Death was not for me. Not yet.

I closed my eyes and stopped fighting, knowing innately I needed to let go, to give myself over to the force rattling its cage. The second I imagined myself floating instead of sinking, the frantic feeling subsided. The sunken memory skyrocketed to the surface, then broke free.

I opened my eyes, and Wrath drew in a sharp breath. A reaction so small it would be deemed unremarkable coming from anyone other than him, yet I knew this was the beginning of the end. The truth I’d fought so hard to find was no longer hidden by magic.

“I remember.” My voice was scratchy as if I’d been screaming for hours. Maybe I had been. Time felt strange. My prince looked weary, but hopeful. “I know who I am.”

Wrath’s dagger was now in his hand. He stood and motioned for me to do the same. We walked to a mirror hanging near the bathing chamber, and the demon nodded to the glass. “Tell me what you see. Who you see.”

Glittering rose-gold irises steadily gazed back at me. A mark of my true power. Though part of me wasn’t as surprised as I ought to be. Maybe deep down, where the curse couldn’t sink its claws in, I’d always known. There was a reason I was aligned best with my sin of choice.

Celestia’s words drifted back to me from the night I’d met her in Bloodwood Forest; the Crone had said Wrath was my mirror. I’d suspected then but couldn’t reconcile the truth of *how*.

Now the truth was staring back at me, waiting. “I see fury.”

“And?”

My fire. My anger. That ancient, terrible power I’d only barely scratched the surface of. They all belonged to me. “I see the goddess who rules it.”

“I see my equal. My queen.”

Wrath handed me his blade, his lips curving seductively. He seemed lighter, slightly less weighed down, like a nightmare was finally over. I wasn’t as sure but held my tongue. There were still plenty of things I couldn’t yet remember, which meant even with some of Wrath’s power inside me, the curse wasn’t fully broken.

My memories were only just starting to slip out through the crack we’d made, and I had a terrible suspicion that many more unsettling

truths were waiting to be revealed.

Wrath pulled me against him, and tucked within the safety of his arms, I hoped perhaps he was right. That even if the curse wasn't completely broken, maybe things would be better now. He angled his mouth close to me and whispered, "Welcome back, your majesty."

SEVEN

"**I need to** sign the blood oath." Wrath pressed a kiss to my forehead, then pulled his trousers on. It was so normal, mundane, after the cataclysmic realization of who I was. After what we'd just done, not to mention the scene we'd created and the potential consequences of Wrath's destroying part of his brother's castle. And terrorizing the duke. Goddess above. The duke. After his fear had worn off, I imagined he'd be embarrassed to have soiled himself in front of other members of the nobility. The last few hours felt like a wild, years-long fever dream. "We can discuss everything in detail once we're home. Will you be all right?"

I kept staring at my reflection in the mirror. I was not a witch. I was the goddess of fury. If I didn't just witness the truth, I'd still not believe it. My irises slowly returned to the warm brown I'd been used to for so long, another reminder I was not fully free from the curse yet. "Yes."

Wrath watched me, noting the moment I *really* looked at the dagger. It wasn't his House dagger as I'd thought it was. Up close it was slightly smaller than his. Lighter.

The snake also didn't have lavender eyes; the gemstones in this dagger were dark pink. Vines twined around the hilt, winding delicately around the serpent, much like the vines I'd summoned earlier in his bathtub.

"It's yours," he said, answering my unspoken question as he shrugged on a crisp, new shirt. I searched for a memory of the dagger but didn't recognize it at all. Wrath moved before me, tilting my chin up until I met his steady gaze. "I never had the chance to give it to you before. But it is yours. I designed it myself."

My attention dropped back to the dagger. I liked the feel of it. The

weight. It was perfect for me. Just like the clothes he'd had waiting in my wardrobe when I'd first entered this world. Because Wrath knew me. For goddess knew how long. I was no eighteen-year-old witch; I was an ageless being. Unable to handle the full scope of what that meant, I shook those thoughts away, concentrating on the weapon in my hand. I had my own House dagger.

Worry gnawed at me.

"Now that we completed the physical part of our marriage bond, will the decree you made earlier about Vittoria apply to me?" I asked.

"You're not officially a member of my House until you swear a blood oath." He buttoned his shirt, seeming to choose his next words with care. "And the decree gives each House the authority to do as it sees fit. Technically, that allows me to do just that without breaking the oath. We will find Vittoria before my brothers can. You won't have to swear a blood oath unless it's what you want. In fact, I might see how we can arrange for us to swear an oath together."

If I didn't already know I loved him, that would have sealed his fate. I looked at my dagger again, a new realization forming. "Vittoria is the goddess of death, isn't she?"

"Yes."

Hysterical laughter bubbled up my throat, but I choked it down, refusing to start crying instead. I'd prayed to the goddess of death and fury countless times after Vittoria's "death." She was the deity I connected with most during my quest for vengeance. Now I knew why.

Except it was all much more complicated than I'd ever imagined. Instead of one deity, there were two goddesses: Death and Fury.

Even now, seeing my eyes change color from my power, I had a difficult time accepting it. I'd grown up. Had a mortal family. Lived a fairly unremarkable life in Palermo before my sister "died" and I'd accidentally summoned the king of Hell.

Or maybe not so accidentally? It could not have been a coincidence that Vittoria had left the incantation needed to summon Wrath where I'd find it. I just needed to know why.

Did she think he was the key to freeing the rest of my memories? And if she believed that, then why would she tell me to not marry him now? Was it really only because she believed that in order to join his House, I'd have to give up something of me in return? There was clearly much more to the story, considering some of her actions didn't quite line up with her words.

For now, I couldn't imagine how our lives as goddesses had been covered up. Magic was the likely source, but I'd never heard of such a spell. Every memory I had of our life seemed real. If it was a glamour, it had been cast by someone with immense power. Someone like La

Prima Strega.

I thought of Nonna Maria, of the secrets she'd kept from us. The stories she'd twisted about the Wicked and the First Witch and the devil's bride. Nonna told us that when it came to the Wicked, *nothing* was ever as it seemed. But maybe the true villain had been much closer all along.

To even *think* that made my stomach clench. A betrayal that large was unfathomable, though nothing would surprise me now. The people I'd loved unconditionally were turning out to be morally questionable, and the creatures I'd been conditioned to hate were not so terrible after all. My world was collapsing around me, from the ground up. It seemed as if a giant chasm split open and was swallowing me whole. Wrath reached over and stroked my arm.

"I can't… I can't remember much else." I glanced back up at Wrath. "Will I regain all my memories? Or will the past always be fuzzy?"

Instead of answering, Wrath summoned clothing—a velvet gown, gloves with buttons running up the side, and a traveling cloak—from the ethers and laid them on the bed. Little vines and flowers were embroidered along the edges. Rose-gold and black.

A blend of his colors and mine, apparently.

I forced myself to focus instead on what had driven us here and the new consequences of failure. "The duke mentioned several interesting things about Vesta. Did you hear any of it?"

"Most of it," Wrath admitted. "Vesta wasn't from here originally. My brother Greed supposedly wanted to wed her. And she was distracted lately. Couldn't scent blood, but inquired about it in detail. A curious amount of werewolf blood would be present at any scenes she'd attended. All, unfortunately, is court gossip without fact. Though I'm particularly intrigued by the blood. It's unusual enough for the commander of an army to be unable to trace information one can easily and effectively glean from scenting the scene, but on top of that, wolf blood frequently appearing is perplexing."

"If she was unhappy here, those inquiries might indicate she was trying to find a way to fake her own murder. If it were me and I couldn't scent the same information a demon could, I'd want to know every last detail to craft a believable ruse. Perhaps those instances of werewolf blood before were for practice. Maybe she was seeing how much was needed to overwhelm a demon's senses."

My sister had certainly proved that feigning a murder was possible. Until I found irrefutable proof otherwise, I'd remain suspicious that Vesta might not be truly dead. A new thought occurred to me, but it was another complex riddle, one that needed time to sort out.

“What is it?” Wrath asked.

“Things aren’t quite making sense. Vittoria chose to strike an alliance with Greed. It was supposedly to unite his court and the werewolves, but it’s peculiar that his commander should be ‘murdered’ under such mysterious circumstances. Especially when Vittoria is an expert at crafting a believable death. If Vesta is truly as talented as Greed had claimed, I find it hard to believe she was easily overtaken. No one hearing the attack can be explained away by a ward, but—for the sake of argument, let’s remove werewolves from the equation—who would have had access to her private suite? Your brother didn’t mention anything amiss outside her chamber. No scratches or forced entry. Which means she must have known whoever she’d allowed in. There has to be more to his story. Will you question your brother and see what he says?”

“Of course. But we might have a better chance of learning the details from your sister. Greed will not likely cooperate with a rival House, even if he’d sought our assistance.” Wrath pulled on a pair of leather gloves, hiding our new marital tattoos. “After you dress, the carriage will be waiting for you out front. I’ll meet you there shortly. Wife.”

Despite everything chaotic and wrong, a smile tugged at my lips. “Husband.”

It felt right. More than right. It felt like coming home.

The demon prince drew me close, kissing me fiercely enough that I melted against him, then left. Our game of deception wasn’t yet over. He had one more part to play. Hopefully, Greed would be annoyed enough by the destruction of one of his gaming halls and wouldn’t press for my signature or appearance. He’d want me as far away from Wrath as possible, lest I set off his brother’s temper again and ruin the rest of his castle. I’m sure the duke was already in his ear, too. Nobility didn’t care to be made fools of.

Which made me wonder if that could potentially be motive for someone to murder Vesta. At this stage, I wasn’t ruling out any possibility. Greed’s behavior was certainly odder than usual, continuing to cast him into question for me.

I pulled myself together, quickly dressed, and had just stepped outside into the softly falling snow, reaching for the coach door, when Wrath appeared. It should be disconcerting that someone so large could move so silently, but my husband was a predator who only pretended to be civil.

Wrath helped me into the carriage—the driverless black-and-gold beauty pulled by the four horsemen of the apocalypse, Wrath’s pet demon horses—and pounded his fist against the roof, signaling for the red-eyed, ebony horses with metal teeth to take off.

He flicked the velvet draperies aside, regarding the passing landscape with a growing scowl. To our left, the Black River churned, the dark-capped waves bubbling like a cauldron.

An uneasy feeling crawled along my spine. The water had been much calmer when we'd first arrived, and if Nonna Maria imparted anything, it was to look for signs of trouble.

Unrest was certainly brewing.

I wondered if it had anything to do with the blood oath the princes just signed. Perhaps the Seven Circles were already preparing for my sister's demise. And, despite Wrath's promise that we would find her first, maybe danger was already pounding at her door.

Wrath met my inquisitive gaze and gave a slight shake of his head. We hadn't traveled far enough from the rival House, and Greed probably had spies stationed near the edge of his castle's immaculate, snow-covered lawn. Like all magic, there were limits to the spells Wrath used to keep our rooms private. Since this was a moving conveyance, it was likely too complex for the magic to keep up. I nodded my understanding and turned my attention on the window. I was desperate to ask if he'd gathered any more information on Vesta from Greed, but we'd be home soon enough and could discuss everything freely there. My burning curiosity would need to wait.

We sat in tense silence as the carriage rolled down the long drive that led over a small tributary. After what felt like an hour, but had probably been only half that time or less, we finally ascended the steep hill that would take us to a bridge connecting the land between House Pride and House Wrath.

At the top of the hill, Wrath went on full alert. I wanted to know if he could sense Vittoria or if there was some other cause for alarm, but he flashed me another look that indicated it wasn't safe to speak yet. I racked my mind for any other known threats but couldn't think of one. He removed his gloves and withdrew his House dagger, pressing the tip into his palm, hard enough to feed the blade a bit of his blood. Both the metal and jeweled eyes glowed as if pleased and fortified by his offering. His cut healed within seconds. A fine perk of immortality. I wondered, if I was a goddess, how I could be mortal. Wrath finally broke the silence.

"If anyone approaches the carriage and anything goes badly, for whatever reason, activate your cloak and run for our fortress. Anir will command the army while I hold them off."

"Activate my cloak? It's magic?"

He nodded. "Feed it a bit of your power and it will reflect the world around you, essentially making you invisible. It won't mask your scent but should give you time to escape."

"You expect me to abandon you if we're attacked?"

“Yes. Right now, I’m the general and you’re a soldier. You’ll do as ordered.”

“Is that so?” I raised my brows. “I don’t recall swearing an oath or making any vows.”

My tone had been measured, but my king was no fool. Wrath’s answering look would probably send his demonic soldiers running to the latrine with loose bowels.

I was not his solider. I was his wife. And if the arrogant ass thought I’d leave him, to whatever enemy might be lurking, he was sorely mistaken.

As was just evident by my power-fueled rose-gold irises, and my ability to produce fire that now burned physical objects, I was not without frightening magic of my own. And I would stand beside him, fighting with my last breath if it came down to it.

“I’m immortal, Emilia.”

“And what am I?” If I was a goddess, and we’d had years together in the past, then there was something else he wasn’t telling me. Something I’d get to the bottom of once we were home.

Wrath’s gaze battled mine, all golden fire and icy fury. It was a skirmish he wouldn’t win; my mind was entirely made up. No point he could argue would dissuade me from staying with him. After another long moment, he finally surrendered.

“If anything goes wrong, I’ll try to *transvenio* us onto our grounds. Stay close and get your blade out. Strike first and fast. If anyone is brazen enough to attack us during the afternoon near my House, they won’t hesitate to harm you.”

“Do you believe it’s V—”

A howl rent the air, the sound reverberating through the coach. A second howl went up. Followed quickly by a third and fourth. Soon, a whole chorus of mournful howls filled the air, bouncing back against the mountains in the distance and echoing softly.

Fine hair all over my body raised.

Wolves. From the sound of them, they were large, otherworldly werewolves. That answered my question about *who* was out there, but it left the *why* up for contemplation. The horses whinnied and growled, the sound unlike any mortal horse I’d ever encountered.

At first glance, Wrath seemed calm, focused. Until I saw the flicker of excitement in his eyes. He was made for war, for battles. Where others would shut down from fear, something shook him awake. He gave me a slow, cocky grin. “The shifters are angry.”

And that blessed emotion was fueling the demon’s already incredible store of magical power. I returned his smile, feeling relief sink into my bones. We’d be fine. Wrath let the curtains fall back, hiding us from view. Apparently, he wasn’t concerned with seeing his

enemies.

Another howl went up, closer this time, louder and filled with what was probably alpha command. Domenico was here. I couldn't imagine why the wolves were in the Seven Circles, and after Greed's insistence that they'd attacked his commander, fear gnawed at me despite my husband's excitement. Given the way Domenico had been with my sister, how easily and quickly he'd heeded her command to stand down with me, I couldn't picture him acting against her.

Wrath hit the roof of the coach with a closed fist, startling me, and our carriage rolled to a sudden stop. This was it. Nervous energy hummed through me.

If the werewolves were here and so was Domenico, I prayed that meant my sister wasn't far behind. If she was, and if they weren't planning an attack on their own, then all we had to do was neutralize the shifters, grab Vittoria, and take her to House Wrath. None of the other princes would even know we'd found her and stowed her away.

Wrath jerked his chin toward the door, indicating he was about to open it. I clutched the hilt of my dagger, my palms damp and heart pumping. If I could find my sister and speak with her, perhaps we could avoid bloodshed altogether. Surely when she saw me, she'd stand down. Then we could discuss Vesta, and I'd have my answer one way or another about her guilt.

"Remember, stay close. Strike fast." The prince paused with his hand on the knob, then shook his head. He grabbed me around the waist and kissed me hard and fast. "If you die on me now, I'll hunt you down and drag you back."

"Sounds rather threatening."

"It's a fucking promise, my lady."

"I love you, too." I cupped his face. "If you're quite through, let's kill some werewolves."

His gaze darkened. "Bloodshed turns me on almost as much as your little performance did. I'm going to take you directly to bed after the fight." Wrath flashed a devastating grin. "And we're not going to reemerge for a long, long time. I hope you packed the pearl skirt."

Any nervousness or trepidation I was feeling vanished. I suspected Wrath's speech was meant to get my mind on what would happen *after* the battle, to give me something to focus on. He was a good general; I'd tear through a thousand wolves just to get him back into bed.

His smile was filled with male arrogance. Deservedly so after our earth-shattering lovemaking, so I couldn't fault him there. Sensing I was ready, Wrath palmed his dagger and shoved the door open. He burst through it in a flash of violent movement. I jumped out directly after him, my blade ready.

The elation I'd just felt disappeared as I took in the sight before us.

Wolves, nearly a hundred of them, oversized and monstrous, stood on the bridge, shoulder to shoulder, blocking our path to House Wrath. But that wasn't what had my heart thudding in my chest. It was the dozens of wolves that floated in a semicircle around us, their paws ten feet above ground. They were spirit walkers. And they were waiting in the wings to pounce if any of their brethren went down.

Blood and bones. I had little doubt Wrath would take a huge portion of them down alone, but there were so many. Too many. My sister had amassed an army. As if my thoughts summoned her, Vittoria appeared behind a row of particularly vicious werewolves. Gone was her signature smirk, the mischievous light dancing in her eyes. The being that stared at us was cold, devoid of humanity. Immortal. She was what I truly was, and it chilled me to the core.

"We had an appointment to speak today, sister. I got tired of waiting, so I brought some friends to escort you to the Shifting Isles." Vittoria's focus moved to Wrath. "I suggest you let her go quietly."

The ground rumbled, as if Wrath's fury had shaken the very core of the realm. "Surrender yourself to House Wrath, willingly and peacefully, and I'll allow your puppies to live."

"How very magnanimous of you." Vittoria's mouth curved into a slow, vicious smile. "And foolish. It seems you've not heard what I can do. Allow me to demonstrate."

"Vittoria," I said, forcing calmness into my voice. "Come with us."

"Why should I?"

"Because you're suspected of murder, and there's a price on your head."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." I held her amused stare. "And I believe there's much more to the story. Please. Stand down and come talk to me. I want to hear your side of things. Let me help clear your name of any wrongdoing."

"Why should I care if a prince of Hell thinks I'm a murderer? None of them can be trusted. They trick and manipulate and pride themselves on it. And I've tolerated playing by their rules long enough."

My sister held her right arm up and bent her elbow as if she were holding a ball. She was too far away for me to make out the words she was whispering, but I watched in growing fear as she softly chanted. Glittering lavender light swirled around her bent elbow, slowly circling her forearm and wrist, before settling around her hand.

Wrath cursed and stepped in front of me, shielding me with his body. I peered around him, horrified as my sister's fingers lengthened. Claws emerged from her too-long fingers, ebony as the night and

sharper than daggers. Her arm looked charred, as if she'd stuck it into some hellfire and yanked out magic that wished to be left alone. Dark veins crept past her elbow, seeming to mix with her blood. The swirling lavender light winked out.

She held up her clawed hand, proudly showing off the demonic-looking appendage. I could do nothing but stare as she turned to a shifter. "Domenico, my love. Come."

The grayish-blue wolf to her right—the size of a bear with glowing pale purple eyes—padded toward my twin, whining softly as it crouched before her.

Without warning, Vittoria's magically altered hand punched through the wolf's chest, the sound of bone crunching and muscle tearing sickening in the eerie silence. I could hardly believe what had happened. Vittoria ripped her arm back, clutching a still-beating heart and pivoted, holding it up for all to see. Domenico collapsed in an unmoving heap of bloody fur, dead.

"What have you done?" I whispered. My stomach lurched at the brutality. The gore. I'd seen wounds like that before. On witches. Wrath and I hadn't quite known what had removed their hearts. He'd guessed animal, unable to identify any trace of a demon. I'd been convinced it was a prince of Hell. I slowly shook my head, unable to process that my twin was capable of an act so violent, so merciless. She'd murdered her own lover. *She'd* murdered the witches on our island. The why was still a mystery, but I now knew who. And it sickened me. "You killed those girls."

Not Antonio, or an angel of death. My sister. My blood.

And at this moment, it was hard to believe she hadn't also killed Vesta.

Vittoria looked me over, her gaze calculating. "Anyone can kill, dear sister. Would you like to see the true reason they fear me? Why they wish to see me caged?"

"Please." My voice came out pleading, but I didn't care. "Please. Don't. Just come with us."

"Begging is for mortals."

Vittoria shifted, her attention dropping to the lifeless wolf at her feet. With her free hand, she bent two fingers in a "come here" motion, and Domenico's lifeless wolf body levitated. She cocked her head, looking at the heart that still beat slowly in her hand, then shoved it back into his chest. When she ripped her demonic hand back out, the wound healed immediately.

His matted fur disappeared, replaced by a shiny, nonbloodied wolf coat. All signs of death were gone. Domenico's glowing eyes opened, and he snarled, baring his teeth.

Not at the creature who'd slain him, but at us. All I could do was

stare, unable to process that my sister had not only murdered someone but also brought them *back*.

"We are hell gods, Emilia. *We* are the Feared." My twin looked at me again. "Neither witches, nor shifters, nor even princes of Hell can stand against us when we're united. Your power is awakening. It's time to take back what is ours. It's time to come home."

My home was House Wrath. By choice. Something dark rose up inside me, protective.

"Is this why you cautioned me away from Wrath? Because you want me to join you?"

"Of course. You don't belong with the demons. You belong with your blood."

"And if I refuse to go with you?" I tested my grip on my dagger. "What then?"

My sister allowed a few beats of silence to pass, just long enough for it to be uncomfortable.

"We'll find another way to free your power from its magical cage." Vittoria ran her attention over Wrath, amusement lighting in her eyes as the ground rolled beneath her feet. "You are kerosene. Volatile. Noxious." She pulled a dagger from the ethers. Its blade glowed with strange magic symbols. Wrath went preternaturally still. "And I am the spark you need to ignite."

My husband didn't wait for her to strike.

In a whirl of movement and fury, he unleashed the full might of his power.

And the wolves attacked.

EIGHT

Wrath fought with brutal grace, moving like a living, breathing nightmare as he cut a bloody swath through our enemies. He killed without mercy or pause. Something leapt, he destroyed, already on to the next kill before the former hit the ground.

His body wasn't simply made for war; it was built for it through hard work, a weapon he'd honed to perfection for this very purpose. For a moment that just lasted from one heartbeat to the next, I could only stare at the warrior.

He struck; wolves went down and didn't get up. Blood splattered across the snowy ground. The metallic tang thickening the air along with the gamy scent of adrenaline. In the matter of mere seconds, the demon of war had already taken down a dozen werewolves. A dozen more froze solid, their bodies suddenly encapsulated in ice, midattack.

Here the infernal truth of his power was on full display.

Wrath sent out a pulse of magic that traveled like lightning across the land. A signal, no doubt. The demon horses broke free of their carriage gear and bridles, charging through wolves, their metal teeth gnashing, tearing through flesh and bone with ease.

I snapped into action, fighting my way through the horde, trying to close ranks around us. Body memory guided my actions, as if I'd always known how to kill with the same sort of cold violence. As the goddess of fury, I'm sure I'd had plenty of practice, even if I couldn't remember.

I smashed the hilt of my dagger into the frozen wolves, ignoring the chunks of bodies and bloodied meat that shattered with the ice. My body sung with power, with fury. But there was a limit—it felt like the wall that had been erected when Envy stole my magic.

The curse was still holding me back. For the first time, my anger

at being purposefully kept in the dark overwhelmed my fear of learning the full truth. If we made it out of this fight, I silently vowed I would do everything I could to return to my true self.

Never again would I feel powerless or caged.

Snow started falling heavily, the already gray sky growing darker, more foreboding. If Wrath commanded snow and ice to do his bidding, it made sense that the underworld was a frozen tundra. His power could not be contained, so much that the very land bent to his will. I hoped it terrified our enemies. I wanted the realm itself to swallow them whole.

Wrath pushed forward, reaching the edge of the bridge right as more wolves dropped down from the Shadow Realm. The demon threw his powers behind him, freezing anything that moved other than me and his demon horses. Through the chaos of battle, I searched for my twin.

Vittoria had disappeared, but I felt her presence on the periphery. She was waiting. Whatever she had planned wouldn't be good. I needed to get to her, convince her to stop, or incapacitate her myself. A wolf leapt, jaws snapping, and froze, crashing to the ground a foot from me. Blood splattered across my face. I didn't stop to wipe it.

Behind me a whisper of movement drew my attention. I twisted, striking hard and fast at a wolf that went for Wrath's back. It had come close. Too close. My fury bubbled deep within, threatening to boil over. I stayed close to my king, my rage a war beat that pounded in time with my heart. Wolves attempted to strike the demon, but either he took them down or I did. His horses growled to my right—biting and kicking their way through wolves.

On and on, it felt as if we fought for hours. Blood saturated the ground, my cloak soaking it up like an offering. I reveled in it, thanked it. I welcomed more.

More death. More rage. More *vengeance*. My blade glowed rose-gold under the blood staining it, drinking up the offerings I served it. We'd almost reached the center of the bridge when I heard a sound more terrifying than the werewolves and horses combined. It snarled and barked like a rabid dog. Several of them, actually.

Footsteps pounded, shaking the ground. At the edge of the bridge, coming from House Wrath, four mighty hellhounds paused. I swore under my breath. Wrath hadn't been kidding when he'd called the hound I'd encountered in the Sin Corridor a puppy. It had been the size of a pony. These three-headed beasts were the size of elephants. Their ice-blue eyes flashed—and the wolves nearest them raised their hackles, their attention now split between Wrath and his attack dogs. The fight just got harder for the wolves and my twin. Thank the powers that be.

Without wasting another moment, the snow-colored hellhounds entered the fray. I watched long enough to see their pale fur splattered red with their kills, then resumed my own bloodbath. I focused on the blade in my hand, turning and striking like it was all some well-choreographed dance. The battle was the music, and death my skilled partner. All the while, vengeance pounded against my soul.

Wrath fought with the same fervor as when he'd begun, not looking close to being tired. The wolves couldn't say the same. Some of them stumbled out of the way, thick white foam coating their muzzles, their chests heaving from exertion. Between the hellhounds, demon horses, and Wrath, victory seemed close. Imminent. I ducked as a wolf leapt over me, then slit its throat, its blood spraying my face and dampening my hair as it crashed to the ground.

"EMILIA!"

I turned at the sound of my sister's bloodcurdling shout, unable to stop my first instinct to seek her out and protect. It was a mistake. The world went to hell from that one act of familial affection and humanity. A werewolf knocked me to the ground, its jaws snapping at my throat. Claws tore at my cloak, ripping the flesh of my chest, and I screamed.

Then the wolf was gone, yanked from me and tossed against the bridge so hard its neck and back cracked, loud enough to be heard over the fray of hell horses and hellhounds battling on. The wolf trembled once violently, then stilled. I exhaled and bit down on another yelp. The wound on my chest throbbed with each accelerated beat of my heart. The full pain hadn't exactly hit yet—a result of adrenaline, no doubt. Though I did feel oddly light-headed.

Wrath's eyes were twin flames of gold as he stood over me, surveying the damage done to my body. The temperature dropped impossibly colder. His anger had reached its limit.

My twin, the werewolves, they'd better retreat before he obliterated them. He reached for me, then dropped to his knees. Blood blossomed across the front of his shirt. He looked down, brows tugged close, as if he couldn't believe it, either. A glowing blade protruded from his chest.

"Wrath!" I scrambled up, ignoring the tearing sensation as my wound split further and I gripped him, wrapping my body protectively around his. "It's all right." My hand fluttered over his wound. "I'll take it out. You'll heal."

"You know." Vittoria stood behind Wrath, yanking the dagger from his back without remorse. "So many people are searching for the Blade of Ruination…"

I looked from the wound that was still furiously bleeding to my twin. Wrath said the hexed blade could kill him, and my sister stabbed

him through the heart with a blade that clearly did damage. Wrath usually healed within an instant. He'd also said he could sense it when it was near, but he'd been distracted. Because of me.

His bronze skin was rapidly going pale, but his fury was unmatched as he held my gaze. "Your cloak."

I gave him a look indicating the dagger had clearly affected his common sense. There was no chance in this realm or any other that I'd leave him like this.

"Fix him." I glanced up at my sister. "Fix him now!"

Vittoria appeared to consider my demand. She shrugged. "No."

"Vittoria." My breathing became faster, erratic. "You would deny me this?"

She signaled to the wolf that must be Domenico, and he sank his teeth around my shoulder, hitting the wound on my chest as he yanked me backward. Pain overtook my senses. And the werewolves used the distraction to form a barrier between me and my husband.

I shoved past the agony and stepped to the snarling wolves. "Stop this. Vittoria, just *stop*. I'll do whatever you want."

"Maybe I want to watch him bleed. How does that make you feel, Emilia? Mad?"

Vittoria kicked Wrath's back, right where the blade had struck, and he coughed up blood.

"Angry?" She hit him in the temple with the hilt of the dagger, hard enough that it would have killed a mortal, based on the loud crack alone. He winced as blood poured down his face but didn't cower. Something was definitely wrong or else he would fight back. "Or furious?"

"Stop!" I screamed.

"What will it take to wake your magic?" Vittoria grabbed him by his hair and yanked his head back, exposing his throat as she pressed the blade there. "This?"

Whatever that dagger was, it had done extreme damage to him. If she cut his throat, if I lost him… I detonated. That ancient power, that slumbering beast—it woke with a vengeance at the sight of Wrath's blood. I didn't bother holding it back. I didn't grasp for control.

I let go.

And fury overwhelmed my senses entirely. I became a pillar of rose-gold flame. The air turned scorching hot, though a protective ring flared up around me, Wrath, Vittoria, and Domenico. Everything else except for Wrath's hounds and horses… burned.

Wolves yelped, and the ones not fast enough to leave caught fire. The stench of burnt fur wafted through my barrier, the sickly sweet scent of charred flesh following. Vittoria watched with great interest but said nothing as my power raged even hotter.

The snow and ice turned to puddles, the river water boiled beneath us, wolves farther away blinked out of existence, returning to the Shadow Realm. The stones on the bridge began to melt. In seconds, we'd fall into the steaming water, our flesh boiled from our bones.

I didn't care. I'd take my sister with me. My need for vengeance was an unquenchable thirst I couldn't satiate. I'd take them all and then—

Sleet pelted me suddenly, the icy sting of hundreds of frozen drops briefly snapping me out of my trance. Wrath's fingers clasped mine, squeezing once before his grip went limp. I dropped my power, then I went to my knees, cradling him against me.

"Of course the Blade of Ruination has been impossible to find," Vittoria finished, tossing the blade aside. "Which is why I had to resort to poison instead. Being the goddess of death has its perks. It took some time to get the potion correct, but I made something strong enough to take down an immortal."

It took a second for my brain to catch up from my emotions and piece together what she'd been saying. I jerked my attention to my sister. "You didn't find the Blade of Ruination?"

"Not yet." Vittoria sighed dismally. "Though lying about it worked just as well, all things considered." That was why Wrath hadn't sensed it. It was all a fucking ruse. My fury took hold of me again, but before I could unleash myself, my twin raised her arm and made a squeezing motion with her hand. "Sleep."

My heart slowed. Panic seized me as I realized there was no way I could help Wrath or myself now. My head hit the ground with a crack. I stared unblinking at my husband, who seemed to have rallied and was shouting my name.

His face was the last thing I saw before the world went dark.

I awoke to the sound of fire crackling, though cool dampness permeated the air instead of warmth. It smelled of turned earth. Like a grave. The very ones Nonna used to take us to each full moon so we could collect dirt to bless our amulets and ward off the devil. My husband.

I blinked up at a ceiling covered in roots and sat up with a start. It was dark, underground dark, and the thick roots crisscrossing the ceiling indicated that wherever I was, a giant tree was above me. I glanced around the empty room… cell. Bars made up one entire wall, too close together to slip through—the other walls were packed dirt,

the floor impenetrable stone.

Lines of painful fire ran down my chest and turned agonizing.

The battle. Wrath. Wolves.

Everything came crashing back at once. Despite the burning wound, I shot off the straw mattress I'd been placed on and gripped the bars, hoping to rattle one loose.

Sharp pain lanced up my arms, and I quickly let go. The bars were spelled; hopefully it was only a complication, not a complete hindrance. I dove into Source and summoned my fire, aiming for the metal; the flaming rosebuds sank in, the metal angrily glowed crimson, then… nothing. The cursed bars absorbed the magic.

I tested them again and was knocked backward from the surge of power.

Perfect. My magic fed the spell; the more I fought to get free, the more trapped I'd become. It was a nasty little trick, but effective. Goddess curse her. "Vittoria!"

"Do you recall the night you eavesdropped on me talking about the Stars of Seven, Shadow Witch?"

I jolted at the sound of another voice and focused on what I'd thought was a darker shadow pressed into the far corner of my cell. "Envy?"

The prince of that sin sat forward, just enough for the light from the lone torch in the corridor to show his cool, handsome features. "You're not the only one disappointed, pet. I'd rather my brother was here instead, too."

"How *are* you here?"

Envy gave me an annoyed look. "Your sister couldn't keep her demonic hand off me." He absently rubbed at his chest, right where his heart should be. His shirt was torn like Vittoria had, indeed, wrenched out his heart. He caught my horrified expression and gave me a slow, wicked smile. "Not to worry. It grew back. Shriveled and just as black. But it's there."

"I don't want to know."

"Immortality." He shrugged. "Wounds heal, hearts regenerate. Life goes on. And on."

When stated like that and muttered in a bland tone, it sounded dreadful.

"If Vittoria didn't want you dead, why would she rip your heart out and lock you in a cell?"

"In case you haven't noticed, your sister is both a sadist and a psychopath. Though judging from that nasty wound on your chest, that's not surprising news." Envy rose to his feet and brushed the dust from his trousers, then he scowled at his dirty hands. "She also happens to be obsessed with me, though I suppose I can't fault her for

that. I'm unbearably handsome. My refusal of her advances, as well as her offer of an alliance, drives her mad."

"You're unbearable, perhaps, but the rest remains to be seen." It was interesting that my sister had also sought out Envy when she'd had an alliance with Greed. Unless it happened the other way around. "Were you her first or second choice for an alliance?"

"Second. Though I'm sure she wishes she came to me first. My coffers are bigger than Greed's."

"I doubt that, your highness."

He really grinned at me this time, showing off his boyish dimples. I'd only seen them once before, and it softened me to him.

"Looks like your sister isn't the only one with sharp claws. Believe what you like, pet, but remember I can't lie." He glanced at the marks on my chest. If I didn't know better, I'd think concern creased his brow. "You need to get that taken care of. It already looks infected, and the rot will stink up the cell to high hell."

"Duly noted." My eyes narrowed. "Why do you keep calling me a shadow witch?" I asked. There was no healer, no bandages, no point in dwelling on something I couldn't tend to. If the wound got that badly infected, the stink would be the last thing to worry about. "I know what I am. Who I am."

"Do you now?" He sounded unconvinced as he sat on the floor again.

I drew in a deep breath, focused on the last image I had of Wrath to fuel my sin. To allow it to temporarily break free from its cage, then I let go. "You tell me."

"Your eyes…" Envy raised his brows, looking almost impressed. "Mortal no more. Seems like immorality has won out. No surprise there. Though you're not healing, which is rather curious."

I released my fury and exhaled. Envy scrutinized my features but didn't comment on what I imagined was the return of my warm brown irises. I lifted a shoulder, then motioned to my eyes. "Not quite immortal."

"You may not have your full powers, but mortality submits to immortality in the end. It's the strongest force of the two. A drop of immortality is more powerful than a bucket of mortality."

That made sense. Almost. Except for the fact that Wrath had fought very hard, more than once, to keep me from "dying." I would get to the bottom of why soon enough. "Let's not get off track. I asked about shadow witches. Tell me what that really means. Please."

Envy cocked his head, considering.

"'Shadow' because you possess a mere shade or shadow of your true power. 'Witch' because with so much dilution of your magic, that is what you are. What all witches are—descendants of goddesses."

“Why couldn’t you tell me that before?”

“The curse wouldn’t allow me to. Seems like more than your eye color is changing.”

I thought about the magic bond between me and Wrath. The one that had allowed him to spear into my mind and crack whatever had been holding my memories at bay. “Do you believe my marrying Wrath has anything to do with that?”

Envy regarded me as if I was suddenly very intriguing. “You both accepted the bond?”

“This appeared on both of our fingers.” I held up my hand, showing the new tattoo. “After we…”

A smile flickered at the edges of his lips. “You consummated your bond at Greed’s House of Sin. I’m surprised Wrath lost control at a rival court. It’s something he’s vowed to never do again.”

I glanced away, thinking of the events that had led up to our impromptu lovemaking. “Part of Greed’s castle collapsed; Wrath’s emotions were running a little high.”

Envy’s bark of laughter drew my attention back to him. “I imagine my dear brother and his temper had something to do with that. It would certainly explain why he’d claim you right then and there. Well played, little Shadow Witch.”

“I hadn’t intended for that to happen.”

“Once something is put in motion, we rarely have control over the outcome, no matter what our initial intentions are.”

Envy leaned back, elbows propped on his knees, hands clasped casually in front of him. His shirtsleeves were rolled to his elbows, showing off surprisingly corded muscle. There was a warrior lurking under the practiced sneer and air of disdain he wore like armor. His dark hair was tousled and out of place, but it only made him seem more indolent. More regal.

It wasn’t the first time he reminded me of what he truly was: a fallen angel. Before I knew that, I used to think he looked like the sort that had a broken halo, which was fitting enough, but now I recognized it as a broken heart.

His emerald gaze flicked to mine, a warning flashing deep within them. “Do not mistake boredom for friendship or charity.”

“I wouldn’t call it friendship or charity.” I smiled a bit sadly. “I’d say kindness, but you’d bite my head off.”

Annoyance radiated off him. “I’m many things, but kind isn’t one of them. Selfish? Definitely. Anything I say benefits my true goal in the end. Never forget that.”

“You know,” Vittoria said as she strolled into the corridor outside our dungeon, “what’s truly pathetic is, I think you actually believe that.”

NINE

My sister stood outside the cell, looking cold and ruthless in her frost-blue gown. Her humanity was gone, but I struggled to believe there was nothing of it left. Even if it was buried deep, deep within her miserable immortal soul. Her gaze shot to me. “You reek of hope. It doesn’t suit you, sister.”

“Where is Wrath?”

She scanned me from head to toe, barely sparing my injury more than a cursory glance as her attention paused on my forearm. On the serpent, crescent moons, and flowers that permanently marked my skin past my elbow now. The very same tattoo Wrath had as well.

Her lip curled back in disgust. “Do you find it odd that he can sense your general whereabouts through those hideous matching tattoos, and you cannot?” She tsked when I pressed my lips together, refusing to answer. “I’d wish to know why the magic only travels one way.”

I wasn’t quite sure that was the truth any longer, but I didn’t reveal something had shifted when we’d completed the physical aspect of our bond.

“Well, I’d wish to know why you’re so brutally annoying, but none of us are getting what we want tonight.” Envy had moved supernaturally fast and now stood beside me. His mouth twisted into a cruel smirk when Vittoria snarled at him, baring her teeth. “Get to the point of your visit so we can continue plotting your demise in peace.”

“My sister would never harm me.”

“Oh, this *is* amusing.” Envy tossed his head back and laughed. “Let me see if I’ve got this right—you maimed her love, injured her with your overgrown lapdogs, set her in a cage, and believe she’s not plotting to find her way back to him and destroy you if you stand in

her way?"

"She would *never*." Vittoria bristled. Though the look she cut in my direction seemed less certain. "We're blood."

"And he is her *fate*. As she is his. 'As above, so below.' *They* are the balance. Light and dark. One fallen from above, and one created in the underworld below." Envy's spine straightened, and all his amusement vanished. Something inside me clicked into place. His words *felt* right—like a key sliding into a lock. "Did you not listen to a word I said when you'd invaded my House and fucked my second? You cannot win against love. It is a force more powerful, more terrifying, than any magic you possess or fear you inspire. Even now."

I stilled. His words brought on a recollection that seemed important. Nonna had said love was the most powerful magic, that it would always guide me where I needed to go. I'd been convinced she meant the love of my family, but knowing what I did now, I wasn't as sure. Especially since she'd said that right after pointing out I'd been Marked by a prince of Hell.

"Fate is an unfaithful bitch. Just like love." Vittoria seethed. "With the right prompting, her head can be turned. Just like Pride's was."

"Was his head really turned?" Envy countered. "I wouldn't be as sure."

"I will not permit my sister to be bound by such foolish constraints as fate or love."

Envy flicked his gaze to me. "I'd love to see you try to stop her."

I was through with being spoken about as if I weren't present. And I was not without power, no matter if I'd been taken against my will. I would bend this meeting to my advantage. Before my sister could retort, I quietly cast a truth spell. I was still a witch, but my magic was closer to that of a goddess now. The spell lashed out and gripped my twin, squeezing her tightly. When I spoke, my voice was laced with pure dominance. With the surge of power, I sounded more demonic than any of the princes ever did. "Where is Wrath?"

Vittoria's eyes nearly bulged as she tried to fight off the magical command. I fed the spell more power, watching coldly as blood trickled from her nose, dripped onto her pretty gown.

Her teeth ground together; sweat dotted her brow. It was all happening so quickly, but I'd crush her skull and break her mind to get what I wanted. Envy chuckled at my side, likely sensing my growing savagery. Her attention shot to him, glaring. "My temple."

"WHERE?"

Vittoria's nostrils flared. She was strong, but I was fueled by rage. "The Shifting Isles."

"Did you murder Greed's commander?"

"No."

“Did you hire someone to murder her?”

Vittoria bared her teeth again but managed to keep her answer to herself.

The magic had already been receding, so I wasn’t sure if she lied about murdering Greed’s commander or not, but it gave me a sliver of hope that she hadn’t. “Thank you, sister. That wasn’t too painful, was it?”

She staggered away from the bars of my cell, her expression murderous as she swiped the blood from her nose. “You’ll regret that.”

I made sure to mimic her cold look from earlier, my voice full of malice. “Like you’ll soon regret locking me in here, keeping me from Wrath.”

“I warned you.” Envy practically bounced on the balls of his feet. “You struck the match; I hope you meant it when you said you enjoyed the burn.”

I ignored their side argument and stared at my twin. “Did you send the enchanted skull to Greed?”

“Anyone with the correct spell can enchant a skull. Even a prince of Hell.”

It wasn’t a direct answer, but it did make me wonder again if Greed had been behind the skull. Thus far, I hadn’t found anything to prove he *didn’t* send it to himself.

“Yes,” Envy drawled, “even lowly demon princes can do parlor tricks. Just like a goddess.”

“Have any of your wolves been attacked by demons or gone missing?” I asked. “Aside from the coup you just pulled with me and Wrath.”

“If a demon harmed a wolf under my care, that demon would no longer breathe.”

“Even if that demon were a high-ranking official of a court you’d aligned yourself with?”

“Especially then.” Vittoria’s attention slid to Envy. “If you continue smirking at me, I’ll tear your heart out a second time, demon.”

“Vittoria,” I said sternly. “Have any of your wolves been slain or stolen in the last week or so?”

“Why do you need to know that?” she asked. I gritted my teeth. It was a familiar deflection tactic that Wrath used when he was avoiding a question.

“I found out werewolf blood can overwhelm demon senses. There was quite a lot of it found around Greed’s commander’s remains. You remember Vesta, don’t you? I’m sure you must have met when you’d made that alliance with House Greed.”

“I didn’t pay much attention to Greed’s lapdog.”

“You sound bitter,” Envy remarked. “Did she refuse your advances, too?”

I wanted to press the issue, but my sister obviously wouldn’t speak in front of a demon. “Why am I here, Vittoria?”

She wrenched her attention from Envy and took my measure. “I want you to accept your full power. It’s time to shed your mortality, punish our enemies, and reclaim our House.”

“How in the world am I supposed to shed—”

I halted what I’d been about to say. A memory was rattling around, trying to slip free.

Our House… I flicked my attention to Envy, who seemed very interested in my internal struggle. At his House of Sin, I’d said seven hells, and he’d corrected me to *eight*. I’d been focused on the truth-spelled wine and had let it go, not wanting to waste an opportunity to gather information I’d been after then. I closed my eyes briefly, allowing the memory to materialize.

“House Vengeance.” I snapped my attention to my twin as its name came rushing back. An eighth House. “I can’t remember anything else about it.”

“That’s a story for another time,” Vittoria said evasively.

Envy chuckled. “Please, feel free to share your House secrets. I’ve certainly been curious about it. My brothers, too.”

“Have you never been?” I asked Envy, drawing my brows together. “Or Wrath?”

“No. And none of my spies or any other prince of Hell’s spies has succeeded in entering that circle, either.”

“Is it not here?” I asked, looking to my twin again. A flash of mountains crossed my mind. Snowcapped and treacherous. Isolated. “That’s what you meant by taking back what is ours by birth,” I said. Vittoria nodded but didn’t elaborate. Of which I was grateful. I couldn’t remember anything specific of our House and needed to absorb one life-altering event at a time. I was also fairly certain that was why she didn’t want me to join House Wrath. She wanted me to rule over our House of Sin. And I would likely have to give that up for our rival court. “You mentioned something about shedding my mortality. How am I supposed to accomplish that?”

“All you have to do is let me remove that mortal heart they gave you.”

Time seemed to abruptly halt. *“What?”*

Vittoria drifted closer to the cell. “I’ll make sure it’s quick, near painless.” She nodded to my chest, to the claw marks that still burned. “Those will heal instantly. No infection. No scars.”

I clutched a hand against my chest, stepping backward. She was serious. My twin wanted to take my heart. “I don’t… what do you

mean that someone *gave* me a mortal heart?"

"I mean, you were shackled from accessing your truth. You were given something mortal in hopes that humanity would bleed into the fabric of your soul. They wanted you tamed. Who do you think would have done such a thing?" Vittoria leaned against the bars again, the magic sizzling against her skin. She didn't seem to notice any pain. Or care if she did. "You know. Suspect. And yet you still don't want to accept what they did to us. What *she* did. They took our power because that's how much they feared us. Feared the vengeance we'd reap."

"No." I shook my head, the denial sitting uncomfortably. Because I knew I was lying to myself. I knew my sister was telling the truth. And yet I couldn't—wouldn't—allow myself to admit it. Out loud or even silently. "Nonna wouldn't. She couldn't have done that. Why would she?"

"It's a spell-lock. Meant to bind. Cast by the darkest sort of magic. Human sacrifice."

"Nonna hates dark magic. Almost as much as the Wicked." I glanced to Envy, who was uncharacteristically quiet. Sadness. That's what flashed in his eyes before he looked away. He believed it to be true. Bile seared up the back of my throat; I felt close to retching. "She would never kill a human. We weren't even allowed to use bones or dark spells."

Because we probably would have discovered the truth much faster, a little voice whispered in the back of my mind. Vittoria didn't say another word, instead granting me the space to come to terms with how much our grandmother kept from us.

My stolen mortal heart broke. Knowing it had come from a human… part of me wanted to have my twin rip it from me at once.

"Don't." Envy was suddenly in front of me, shaking his head. "Don't even consider it. You're not ready. Trust me."

"Why?"

He looked like he didn't wish to answer, probably because he wasn't used to sharing information so freely, but he relented. "There's a small chance you may not survive the transformation."

"You just said immortality always wins."

"I say a lot of things I *believe* to be true. That doesn't make it fact."

"And yet here I stand," Vittoria interjected, "fully restored."

"You rule over death," he snapped. "Of course you'd survive."

I held Envy's stare. Six months ago, if someone told me I'd be considering taking the word of a prince of Hell over that of my twin, I would have thought them mad. I thought of Wrath's conviction about his brother—how he was no murderer. If my husband trusted him, then so would I.

Plus, I wasn't sure what *he* meant by my not being "ready," but I knew *I* certainly wasn't ready to make that decision. Spell-lock or not, I liked my heart where it was.

"If my heart is the only thing standing in your way," I asked Vittoria, "why not just take it?"

"She can't," Envy said. "You must choose to let it go."

"Or?" I asked, searching my twin's face. "What's the consequence?"

Vittoria exhaled. "You'll die. Just as they'd always intended. We were never supposed to remember what we are. The night we took our amulets off? It made a fissure in our curse. That's why she warned us against switching them. They weren't going to alert the devil. They were going to begin a chain reaction that would set us free, another one of their prophecies. No one wants to free vengeance goddesses, especially when they'd wronged them."

"How did you learn of this?" I asked.

"A spell book whispered its secrets to me. Soon after I'd taken my amulet off and had given it to you, my latent ability was unlocked, and it grew stronger over time, the whispers becoming louder and more insistent that I act. One day the whispers led me to the first book of spells. That's how I learned the way to remove my own spell-lock."

It was true. I'd read the entry in her journal that mentioned the whispers and Vittoria's desire to understand. I moved away from the cell bars and collapsed onto the mattress, dust motes puffing up from it in a blast.

Nonna knew this whole time. She'd not only known, but she'd also been the one to bind us into our mortal forms. Knowing we'd eventually die—trapped as mortals—if we didn't willingly choose to break the spell-lock. Our lack of education in offensive spells made sense now. All of it did. And I hated it. I wanted to keep fighting against it, but it all fit.

"But we were children. We grew up. *How* is that possible?"

"Do you remember traveling to that cabin in the woods? The one with Nonna's friend?" Vittoria suddenly asked. I nodded, my unease growing. "How did we arrive there? How did we get home? Why was it so brutally cold and covered in snow? It felt a lot like here, didn't it?"

Recently I had wondered the same thing. Had questioned the true purpose for that visit and how I couldn't remember little details like traveling there and returning home. All I could remember were the cashmere gloves, the bubbling cauldron…

I felt the first prickle of tears forming and locked my jaw together. Our memories, our whole lives, nothing was real. It was all magic and lies and betrayal. And yet it still *felt* real.

“What about our parents?” I asked. “Did they know?”

Something like pity entered Vittoria’s eyes. “I’ll be back later to see what you decide. I don’t suggest waiting too long to make up your mind. Wrath won’t fight the poison off forever. He’s immensely powerful, but not against a magical poison crafted by Death.” She looked to my wound again. “And that needs to heal, or your choice will be made for you.”

“How?”

“If you die naturally, I’ll just bring you back. Without your mortal heart.”

“You could bring me bandages and supplies.”

“You’re right. I could.” Vittoria cocked her head. “But I won’t.”

I’d been lying on the mattress for only a few minutes, staring at nothing while trying to process everything I’d learned, when Envy appeared above me. His glare was impressive. A little haughty, a little vexed, and as brutally intent as I’d ever seen.

“Do you recall the Stars of Seven?” he asked.

“You asked me that before.”

“And you didn’t deign to respond.”

“In case you failed to notice,” I said, a bite in my tone, “we were interrupted.”

“Are you going to lie there and sulk all evening? Or focus on the task at hand?” His voice was crisp with annoyance. How dare I not immediately heed his royal demands.

Aside from a murder I wasn’t certain was truly a murder, there was the blood retribution on Vittoria, Wrath’s poisoning, and everything I’d just learned of my family to contend with in a short amount of time. My world was crashing down faster than Greed’s gaming hall, and Envy ought to crawl back to his corner and leave me to think for a few minutes. I needed to set an achievable list of goals, and at the moment, I was struggling to string together a single thought.

“Allow me to refresh your memory,” he said. “You went searching for the Seven Sisters. You found them and the Triple Moon Mirror I was after. Do you recall where?”

“Why does that—” I sat up, wincing at the resurgence of pain. My skin was beginning to burn up, like a fever was overtaking me. I looked at the roots on the ceiling, piecing together what Envy was getting at. And my stomach sank. “There was a tree in the Sin Corridor. I had to feed it blood to open the secret door in its trunk.”

“Do you know why I sent you after the mirror?” Envy pressed, his tone taking on a bit of urgency. I shook my head. “Because the key to unlock the magic on the tree requires hell god blood. Goddess blood. No one else can get that doorway to open. And I mean *no* one, no matter how powerful.”

“Blood and bones.” My head ached. “If Wrath even managed to somehow break free, he can’t find me. The Sin Corridor blocks our bond. And even if he found the tree, he can’t access it.”

“The tree has roots, but it often moves around, making it nearly impossible for any demon to track. Which means we need to devise an escape plan.” He glanced at my wound with disgust. “And we need to do so quickly before you’re of no use to me at all.”

“Your concern for my welfare is truly touching.” I sighed when Envy nodded in agreement, clearly missing the sarcasm in my tone. “I can’t melt the bars. I doubt I can burn our way out. I can tell my sister I’ll agree to giving her my mortal heart, but if she gets to my heart before we can subdue her, I imagine my acceptance will be enough for her to act. What do you suggest?”

Envy paced around the small cell, running a hand through his hair. He worked his jaw as if he’d come up with an idea but was silently arguing with himself. Finally, he stopped and turned to me. His expression was cold. His eyes twin pits of fathomless hatred. “Your sister wants me.”

I blinked as his meaning sank in. “You’re going to what? Offer to sleep with her?”

“We are on the brink of war, Emilia. I’ll fuck her senseless if I must. I’ll use my sin and make it so good she’ll envy any other lover I take after her. It might buy you time to slip out of the cell.”

“What about you?” I asked, hating that I’d even consider going along with something that clearly made him look on the verge of experiencing my husband’s sin. “If I slip away, you’ll still be trapped. With her. There’s no telling if she *did* murder Greed’s commander. And I’d hate to see what she’d do to you if you betray her.”

“Your concern for my welfare is truly touching,” he quoted back to me, earning himself an offensive hand gesture. “I’ll move so I’m near the cell door. Then I’ll shove her toward the mattress, be as rough as she likes, and slam the door before she knows what we’re doing. If we’re lucky, I won’t have to touch her more than the prodding toward the bed.”

“I don’t like it. There’s—” A low, rattling cough startled us both. I shot the prince an accusatory look, and he shrugged. “How did you fail to mention there was another person here?”

“Regenerating a heart is no small task. I awoke shortly before you did.” Envy strode over to the bars, peering into the semidarkness.

“Who’s there?”

Another cough. It didn’t sound good.

“Hello?” I asked, coming up beside Envy. “Wrath?”

“Emilia?”

My heart clenched painfully. It wasn’t my husband. I couldn’t tell if I was relieved or more worried for his welfare. But still, I recognized that voice.

“Antonio?” He coughed again, the sound closer. As if he were in a cell beside ours. “Are you imprisoned, too?”

His quiet laugh turned into racking coughs. “She promised I’d see my mother again. If I did everything she said. She wanted me to pretend I killed those girls. If I played my part, she swore she’d bring my mother back. Just like she did to the wolf. Angel of Death. That’s what I’d thought. Who else but an angel could bring back the dead? I thought maybe she’d bring the witches back, too. I didn’t know… I didn’t know she wanted vengeance against their families.”

I closed my eyes. His actions made sense. He’d never been the same after his mother’s death. Had abruptly joined the holy brotherhood, withdrew. Grief wasn’t simply a shadow that followed people around; it was the worst sort of companion. It was an emotion that could either encourage someone to wither away through sorrow and tears or turn them into a monster. Craving vengeance like blood. Justice. Retribution. As if spilling blood would bring that one person back. I would know. It was the very same spark that ignited my current path.

It was cruel of Vittoria to dangle that sort of impossible hope in front of his face. Inhuman. I grasped onto the belief that some noble side of her was still left. *Something* redeemable. A bond between us that could never be broken. If there wasn’t, then perhaps Greed had been correct. Maybe she was not meant to be saved.

“She deceived us all, Antonio. Even me.”

Envy flashed a look that stated *he* hadn’t been deceived, and I motioned for him to keep his troublesome mouth shut. He held up his hands in mock surrender and went back to his corner to lurk and plot. *Goddess, grant me strength to deal with superior, arrogant demon princes.*

“Would you want to go back home now?” I asked when my old friend hadn’t said anything else. “It’s not too late, you know.”

“Home.” He said the word as if testing it out and finding the taste a bit too bitter for his liking. “It’s all another deception, isn’t it?” Before I could think of a response to comfort him, he said, “Domenico never leaves her. Even when she comes down here, he stands at the end of the corridor, guarding. And he’s not alone. It’s hard to make out, but there are usually several others. They brought a new one here. She doesn’t come near the cell, but I see her watching. She

seems wilder than the others. Like a feral dog that can't stand being caged. Domenico seems on edge whenever she's near. Which is all the time lately."

"How do you know she's new?"

"I heard them whispering the night she arrived. Something about her being unable to travel between realms. Domenico and another wolf had to retrieve her."

I glanced at Envy. His expression was strained. Even if our plan to lock Vittoria in our cell worked, we'd have the wolves to contend with. Which wouldn't be too troubling if it wasn't for my festering injury and lack of a weapon. I also wasn't sure what Envy's power did, but I wondered if being in a place locked by goddess magic tampered with his abilities at all. Judging by his bleak reaction, it wasn't good. And if there was a new wolf who put the others on edge because of her inability to travel to the Shadow Realm, I didn't want to come face-to-face with her. I strained to see around the bars again.

"Do you know if the new wolf is still here?" I asked.

A terrible sound—bone crunching, followed by a squelching noise—broke the silence. Vittoria stepped into view, holding a dripping, severed heart. Horror turned my blood to ice.

She couldn't have…

"There. Now we don't have to hear him prattle on and he can see his mother again. It *is* what he wanted." I dropped to my knees and retched. My sister slowly knelt, meeting my gaze, Antonio's heart still beating in her hand. "Did you wish to fuck him first? I can bring him back. I forgot you had that crush. He'll be as good as new if I act now. I'm certain it won't hinder his performance, though he is mortal, so he's probably not that impressive on his best day. Though, given how much he liked to talk, perhaps his mouth might be pleasing enough."

"What is wrong with you?" I cried.

"I am doing exactly what I was created to do, Emilia. When will you do the same?"

While battling the wolves, I'd made a vow to myself to do everything I could to unlock my full power, but there had to be some other way for me to achieve that. When I returned to House Wrath, I'd search every damn grimoire I could for a solution.

Vittoria tsked at me and stood, summoned a glass jar from the ethers, stuffed the heart inside, and twisted the cap to keep it secure. It vanished in a wisp of smoke. Gone with the rest of her morbid collection. It made me think of a dream I once had—the night I'd gotten hypothermia and Wrath nursed me back to health. I'd seen images of hearts in jars.

Now I knew where they'd come from. Memories of a different time and place. Her temple perhaps. Or wherever she kept her

collection. Perhaps there was a ghastly chamber in our House of Sin that held her trophies.

"I rule over death," she continued. "You're the one who's confused about who you are and what your purpose is, *Fury*. Did you think House Vengeance was not vicious?"

"You told him you'd bring his mother back."

"Our little friend misunderstood," Vittoria said. "I told him he'd *see* his mother again. Then Domenico and I showed him my little heart trick. Antonio filled in the rest. It's not my fault he didn't ask for clarification. I kept my promise. I imagine his soul is reuniting with his mother now. If you don't wish to fuck him, what is your issue? He was nothing but a mortal tool. He certainly had no trouble stepping over you when it suited his needs. Do you know how easy it was to get him to agree to my plan? Even knowing he would hurt you in the process?"

I stared at my twin, at the stranger she'd become. Seeing her this cold and emotionless, so easily able to murder—maybe she did kill Vesta. I could see this version of my sister standing idly by as her wolves tore the demon apart, leaving the scent of their blood everywhere. Perhaps the new wolf Antonio mentioned had done the honors. Antonio… I retched again, unable to look at his blood coating my sister's hand.

"Bring him back," I begged, wiping the sickness from my lips as I stood. "I swear on my blood, if you do not, I will never help you get our House back."

Vittoria's eyes flashed with something that looked like victory. "His heart for yours?"

I paused. I didn't want to give up my mortal heart, but I couldn't let my old friend die. Vittoria had me backed into a corner, and she knew it. I took a deep breath. "I—"

Envy—who'd been silent up until now—spoke. "You know, I'm curious. How does it feel, knowing your mother favors Emilia? I don't have a mother, but I imagine it's a nasty feeling. One that would inspire my namesake sin."

I felt the slight pulse of Envy's sin, so subtle my sister might not have realized he'd used magic at all. Her eyes narrowed. "For that to be true, our mother would need to show an interest in our existence. She created us, then moved on to the next passing fancy. Do you see her here?" Vittoria didn't even bother to make a show of looking around. Though her use of the term *create* did make me cringe. Apparently, we hadn't been birthed. It was another oddity I had to get used to, though my sister didn't appear disturbed at all. "The Crone is not here because she has more important things to do, souls to torment, and whatever else she indulges in."

Envy's smile was feline—a large, predatory cat who was about to pounce. "My spies have whispered interesting stories. Ones Emilia can verify."

Another soft flicker of his sin. I remained where I was, unmoving, not wanting to break the spell. Though internally I was screaming for him to hurry. Antonio needed his heart back.

"Would you like to know where your mother has been these last years," Envy continued, his tone taunting, "what she's been doing?"

And then I saw it. The slight movement of a shadow on the wall. Someone was standing just out of sight. I tensed, hoping Envy had sensed something my dulled mortal senses had not and that was why he'd started distracting my twin. Vittoria hadn't taken her focus from the prince, making me wonder if she was already aware of who was slowly approaching and was unworried. Or if they'd cast a glamour, hiding themselves from her. I prayed the latter was true.

"I don't care," Vittoria finally said. "She hasn't been trying to break our spell-locks. Hasn't bothered to come to our aid. She created us to watch over the underworld, then left. She's wonderful at disappearing, traveling to whichever realm or universe that strikes her fancy. It could be a thousand years before we see her again."

"House Wrath is a peculiar choice of residence for someone who is uninterested in her daughters. Well," Envy amended, "at least one of them." He looked to me then. "I believe her title was the Matron of Curses and Poisons."

"Celestia." My voice came out in a shocked whisper. I wasn't answering Envy. I was speaking to the woman with silver and lavender hair that had come up behind my twin.

Her dark eyes met mine before dropping to the claw marks on my chest. Something like anger flashed in her ancient gaze, something I recognized in myself.

From one blink to the next, she'd summoned the roots from above us, wrenching them from the ceiling, and wrapped them around Vittoria, chaining her arms, legs, and body. My sister thrashed, completely caught off guard, then stilled as the Crone stepped in front of her.

Celestia's smile was the thing that made monsters afraid. Here stood not simply a goddess of the underworld, but its creator. "Hello, daughter."

TEN

"Mother." Vittoria's shock dissolved almost as immediately as it had appeared. She thrashed against the roots binding her, shouting curses and hexes. Celestia watched, unconcerned. My sister was a powerful goddess, but Celestia was the Crone. A titan. Seeming to realize that, Vittoria stilled, breathing hard, her gaze even harder. "You proved your point. Let me go."

The bars on my cell flared with lavender brilliance, then sank into the earth. I gingerly stepped over the barrier, relieved when I exited the cell without pain or difficulty.

I rushed to the cell beside mine, gripping the bars tightly. Antonio's broken body was slumped on the floor, a pool of ruby-red blood catching the torchlight. My twin lying on an altar, a similar pool of blood surrounding her, flashed across my mind. Unlike my sister, Antonio wasn't immortal. He wouldn't rise again. He would rot, his bones eventually turning to dust. And he would cease forever. No matter what he'd done to me, he didn't deserve this.

"Help him," I turned to the Crone, "please. Give him his heart back."

Celestia's attention moved to the body. There was nothing in her expression to indicate her thoughts. She looked back at me. "He's gone, child. To bring him back now… it is not natural. *He* would not be natural."

I looked from the Crone to my twin, desperate. "Vittoria brought a werewolf back. And Antonio didn't die a natural death. There must be *some* way to fix him."

Celestia pulled the jar with his heart from the ether and held it up for me to see. I wanted to be sick but forced my gaze to not waver. Celestia tapped the glass. "It no longer beats. There is nothing to be

done. He's beyond our reach now. You must let him go, Daughter of the Moon."

"I can't."

The tears I'd been holding back broke free and spilled down my cheeks. It was too much. All of it. Wrath was missing and poisoned; he could be suffering at the moment, and I felt powerless to help him. My childhood crush was brutally murdered before we could find true closure and forgiveness. And my twin—who I literally traveled to Hell to avenge because I loved her that much and was desperately trying to save—was the source of all the heartache.

A sob racked through me. The more I tried to suck it back in, the more I broke down. It wasn't just Antonio's senseless death. It was *everything*. My whole world was crumbling. My family. My life. Nothing was as it seemed. Not even my understanding of my own life, of who I was as a person, as a goddess. The weight of it all, it crushed me.

I went to my knees and submitted to the waves of grief tugging me under. I didn't know how to go on. To get back up. I didn't know if I *wanted* to get up. I was tired of fighting so many battles, both emotionally and physically. Maybe the world would be better off without goddesses and their cruel, inhuman power and wicked games.

Everyone I loved, everyone who had the misfortune to meet me, was suffering.

Envy's gleaming boots came into view as he stepped beside me. I half-expected him to offer a cutting remark, to provoke me into feeling something other than the crushing sorrow weighing me down. Or perhaps to call me the pathetic creature I was.

Instead, he extended a hand. Tears streamed down my face as I stared at it, my sobs nearly choking me now.

"Rise," he said softly. "Just as they always feared you would."

His words, the very same he'd spoken to me weeks ago while I'd visited his House of Sin, drew my attention to his face. He wasn't looking at me like I was pathetic. He looked like someone who understood, intimately, what it was like to lose everything. To be forced to stand when you wished to fall. To get up on your own and defy the hand of fate that brought so much pain by smacking you down time and again. To choose to live and flourish despite the bad. And most important, to dare to dream of better days while your current world was a living nightmare.

"Rise, Emilia," he repeated, his hand a lifeline. "Remind them all."

My tears slowed as my fingers clasped his. He tugged gently but firmly, helping me to my feet. I took a deep, ragged breath and held on tighter, the last of my tears drying. "Thank you."

He squeezed my hand once before letting go. "Naturally, this

benefits me. Don't be too grateful. I still don't like you all that much."

I knew it wasn't the complete truth, but I didn't question how he'd managed to partially lie. Instead, I looked at Celestia and Vittoria. My family by blood. My twin still struggled in her magical root chains, and my mother's face was impossible to read. There would be time to talk, to see what could be done about my mortality and memories, but right now I had to get to Wrath.

I addressed my mother. "The wolves?"

"Are locked in the Shadow Realm for the next hour," she said. "Go. And don't forget, you owe me my book of spells. I'll come for it soon. Have it ready."

"I will." I held the Crone's stare and nodded once. Like any god, I imagined she was mercurial. Her moods shifting with her next whim. I did not need another enemy to look over my shoulder for and was grateful I'd remembered to stick her book into my satchel the night I'd discovered Vittoria was alive.

Envy started down the earthen corridor, not bothering to see if I followed. As promised, when we emerged in the room where I'd first found the Triple Moon Mirror, no werewolves lay in wait.

Envy glanced around the space, his attention landing on everything as if mentally filing the information away for later use. "Not very goddesslike, but I suppose there is a certain amount of rustic charm. If one overlooks the stone and dirt."

Smiling at his commentary, I shook my head and moved toward the pedestal in the center of the room. Last time I was here, it contained the Triple Moon Mirror. Now my dagger gleamed from where it hovered, point down, in its center. I wrapped my fingers around it, feeling a surge of determination fill me. And perhaps hope. I would find my king, then I'd find a way to break my spell-lock. Somehow during that time, I'd also figure out the truth behind Vesta's murder or disappearance and clear my sister from wrongdoing. Or see her pay for her crimes.

I let loose a breath. It wasn't going to be easy, but I'd find a way to accomplish it all. First, I needed to find my partner. My husband.

I faced Envy, remembering what my sister said about Wrath's location. If she could be believed. I wasn't fully a goddess again, so I couldn't be certain, but so far *I* didn't have any issues lying. Unlike the demon princes.

"Do you know where Vittoria's temple is?" I asked. He nodded, his attention fixed on the dagger. "Then let's go."

We stood outside the gates of Hell, right at the beginning of the Sin Corridor, looking at the fierce magic that crackled over the bones. Wrath had cast a spell to lock the gates when we'd first arrived in the Seven Circles, and the magic twisted around it like demonic vines.

This magic seemed slightly off in color and the way it felt, but I couldn't exactly trust my memories. The curse was still hard at work, though it wasn't quite as powerful now that I'd allowed a bit of Wrath's magic into my soul.

The winter storm that always seemed to be present in some capacity was in a full rage. Wherever he was, my husband was furious. His temper and the way it impacted the realm gave me hope, though. Wrath must be unharmed to cause such turbulent weather.

I blinked snowflakes from my lashes, shivering as Envy placed his hand to the gate as Wrath had done. He spoke in an unfamiliar language, and green-colored magic lit up his hand and sank into the gates. He kept his hand there, waiting for that click to sound.

And nothing happened.

Envy swore roundly and tried again. With the same results. He turned away from the gates, shoving his hands through his hair as he paced, muttering to himself. He yanked his House dagger from inside his hunter green suit jacket and pricked his finger. Like Wrath, his wound healed instantly, but he managed to smear blood on the gates. They didn't open.

Any hope I'd been feeling was slowly receding back to fear and uncertainty. Even though I was fairly positive he was all right, I needed to get to Wrath. "Will my blood open them?"

Envy stopped pacing in a circle, narrowing his eyes. "You can try, but I suspect the magic binding the gates was placed here to prevent your kind from returning as much as mine."

He hadn't said "your kind" with any venom, and yet I still flinched. To someone outside this realm, I was akin to a demon. That was going to take some time to get used to. I stepped closer to the elk antlers that acted as the handles.

"Wrath locked them. Why would he bind me or any other prince from leaving?"

"The magic isn't demonic." Envy sighed, his breath fogging in front of him. "The Star Witches have been up to their old tricks again."

Star Witches like Nonna. She'd told me they were the guardians between realms. They acted as the wardens to the prison of damnation. Which I assumed was their name for the Seven Circles. She'd also claimed I was one of the guardians, but I now knew that for the lie it was.

Imagining my grandmother traveling here to lock me in was one

more dagger to the heart. She'd promised to come find me after she told me to run and hide from the princes of Hell; she swore we'd reunite. I hadn't told her I'd decided to come to the Seven Circles, and part of me wanted to believe that if she knew, she wouldn't have locked me here.

"I'll try anyway," I said, still hopeful, though I had doubts.

I pressed my blade to my fingertip, wincing as the blood beaded up, and smeared the antler as Envy had done. I pictured the gates creaking open. Or even blasting open. I hoped that if I believed hard enough, the desired result would manifest. Nothing happened.

I studied the magic, a troubling thought entering my mind. Wrath was trapped outside this realm. Which meant either my sister transported him to the Shifting Isles *before* the Star Witches worked their hex or they somehow had worked in conjunction with each other.

If that was the case, then Nonna must know I was here.

Fire erupted in the air around us, vines crept up the gates, crushing and burning and yanking as if I could incinerate any barrier they tried putting between me and my husband. Blast after blast hit the gates, my fury growing with each failed attempt.

Envy cursed and stepped back, the flames rising higher and higher as if damning the heavens. Whatever spell the witches used, it didn't so much as crack. I let my magic go, my shoulders slumping in defeat. My grandmother had really locked me in Hell.

"Nonna can't be the villain."

"Well, that's the curious thing about perspective," Envy said. "In her version of this tale, you're evil. The prophesied dark one she must protect the mortal world from."

"But I would never hurt anyone. Regardless of a prophecy."

Even as I said it, I knew it was a lie. If someone hurt Wrath or anyone else I loved, I wouldn't hesitate to bring them pain in return. To strike back brutally and viciously.

Envy pressed his lips together, likely already knowing what I'd just realized, and kept his commentary to himself.

There were so many layers to peel back. The curse. The prophecy. I'd barely remembered there was one at all, though the details of it had always been murky. Something I'd been told was a result of the curse, how it twisted with each retelling of the tale.

My friend Claudia had been the one to tell me the hazy memories were a result of the curse, that it was what stopped all of us from remembering. Until then, I hadn't even known there was a curse or a prophecy, only a blood debt owed to the devil. Or so Nonna claimed. My grandmother finally told me about the prophecy the night we said our good-byes. She hadn't given many details, only hinted that

Vittoria and I somehow signaled the end of the devil's curse.

"It's like you said the night I met you," I said, smiling sadly at Envy. "It is a tangled web."

"And we have only begun to snip the threads."

We were both quiet for a moment. "If you were going to kill someone here and didn't want anyone detecting details, would you use werewolf blood to cover your tracks?"

If Envy was surprised by my subject change, he didn't let it show.

"If I wished to incite a war, perhaps. The wolves' senses are superior. They'd eventually track down the truth and strike hard and fast. It's one of the reasons demons stopped kidnapping wolves years ago. Using wolf blood wasn't worth the price they'd end up paying."

"Do you think Vittoria killed Greed's commander?"

"I think it doesn't actually matter one way or another. Whether it was her or witches or shifters. Whether Vesta was kidnapped or feigned her death," Envy said, "Vittoria is the catalyst. She could have apologized, told the truth. Called a truce, anything. Instead, she gathered an army of wolves. She tried to entice Greed into an alliance, knowing it would pit him against us, to use him for whatever game she'd planned. She toyed with me, broke into my House, slept with my second. She went to the vampire court, stirred discord there. She mocked Pride."

"She did?"

"Vittoria clearly enjoys chaos." Envy surveyed the gates one last time. "I know of a secret portal—one the witches don't have access to that will take us to the Shifting Isles." He glanced at my dagger. "Keep that ready. I imagine we'll need it."

Before I could ask where it was or why I'd need a weapon, he grabbed my hand and we *transvenioed* to the secret portal. As the smoke cleared from our demonic travel, I realized why I needed the weapon. Several Umbra demons stood shoulder to shoulder, not so invisible, as they blocked our path. Behind them was a massive pearl-and-gold castle. Ornate to the point of excess, and yet it wasn't Greed's or Gluttony's House of Sin. It was Pride's.

I flashed Envy an incredulous look. "Let me guess, you don't have an invitation."

Wrath had told me a prince showing up to another demon circle uninvited was an act of aggression. Envy lifted his shoulder, undisturbed. "I didn't exactly grab a quill and bottle of ink when your sister ambushed me. Pride will be reasonable. An access tunnel to the portal sits at the eastern edge of his circle, right before the Flaming Tombs begin. I doubt he'll cause trouble."

I slanted a look at the normally incorporeal demons. They didn't seem like a welcoming party. The Umbra demons pulled their half-

rotted lips back, their pointy teeth and dark gums clacking as if they were already imagining our blood wetting their tongues.

"Prince Pride will not see you," the Umbra demon closest to us hissed. "Best to turn back. Hide in your castle until your prince rescues you, little princess."

There was something especially infuriating about a sneering, miserable, mercenary spy spitting the words *little princess* that made my blood boil.

Envy's low chuckle drew their attention. "Looks like my brother's spies have been slacking. You really shouldn't have flung that match." He glanced at me, nodding. It was time to unleash my simmering rage. "Now you'll feel her burn."

The Umbra demons struck fast, but my magic was quicker. Flaming roses and flowers exploded between us, landing on the usually invisible demons. Before they could activate whatever power turned them incorporeal, my thorn-covered vines erupted from the earth.

With just a thought, the vines crawled up their legs, binding them to the ground, and I shoved them down their throats, preventing anyone from casting any spell or shouting for help. Oversized thorns tore through their throats, choking them with their own blood.

I released my fire magic and let the vines do the hard work of maiming and slaughtering. I used to love wearing flowers in my hair, now I loved watching them turn into pretty weapons and destroy my enemies.

One demon sneaked up behind me, but Envy shouted a warning. I turned just as its blade arced down, slicing my already tattered gown. I danced back with only a small scratch. Then I pounced on the demon, my dagger at its throat. It spat in my face and laughed.

"Your prince must not have been interested in teaching you how to fight." It raked its oily gaze down my body. "I suppose he has other ideas for you. Too bad he's about to be replaced. That never was a problem before, though, was it?"

I hauled the demon to its feet, shaking it a little with strength I didn't know I had. "What do you know about Wrath?"

"Only that your beloved will soon be dead. And you will be nothing but the divine whore you are. Poetic justice if you ask me."

Before I thought about what I was doing, I dragged my blade from ear to ear across its throat. Hard enough to tear its head from its body. I coolly stared down at the dead demon, unfazed by what I'd just done. It struck me then what I was slowly becoming. The more the curse lost its grip on me, the more I remembered what it was to be a goddess. To feel no remorse. To be fueled by vengeance and openly welcome the vice of my House.

I bent down and retrieved the head.

Envy whistled and stuck his hands into his pockets, rocking back on his heels. “Remind me not to call you any nasty names. At least not without donning armor and casting a protective spell or twelve first.”

“It wasn’t what it said about me.” I smiled, though it was tinged with sadness, not happiness or pride, at what I’d done. At the prince’s questioning look, I added, “Its mistake was saying Wrath would die. Imagining a world without him… I couldn’t bear it.”

Envy carefully studied me, his expression inscrutable. “If Wrath can’t ever give you his heart, would you still fight for him?”

I surveyed the bodies around us. Some still twitching from where they choked on the vines. If only I’d been able to do this during the battle with the werewolves, perhaps my husband might not have gotten stabbed or poisoned at all. “I can only hope one day you won’t have to ask me such a question,” I said. “That my actions will speak louder than my words.”

I thought of Wrath with that last statement, understanding exactly why he preferred actions over words. They held more value. More meaning than words that could just be pretty lies.

With my prize in hand, I faced the castle and started walking for the doors. It was time to pay the prince of this circle a visit. One way or another, Pride would let me use that portal so I could get to my husband.

Envy fell into step beside me, stealing glances I pretended not to notice. If he was about to question why I took a souvenir of our bloody battle, he decided against it.

And that made the mortal part of me wonder if I’d actually frightened a prince of Hell.

ELEVEN

After much arguing—mostly due to my less-than-palace-worthy clothes—and helped largely in part by a little display of my fire magic, we were announced to Pride's court. His throne room was a testament to his sin. The first time I'd been detained in his House after wandering through his fields of slumber root, I'd seen only one room. It had been ornate, gilded, like something the Sun King would have adored. Perhaps Louis XIV was inspired by this prince.

The floor was white marble with delicate gold veins. Cathedral ceilings with colorful frescoes painted on them were also gilded where the wall met the ceiling. Oversized crystal chandeliers hung the entire length of the room in even intervals, giving off a warm, sun-kissed glow.

Ornamental molding was used as trim on both the floor and upper wall. Arched mirrors hung along the walls on the left and right, creating a mirrored pathway to the prince. Of course someone as prideful as he was would require so many opportunities to gaze upon his glorious self.

At the end of the very long hall of mirrors, Pride lounged on his throne, wearing a deep navy-and-gold brocade waistcoat, slim trousers in charcoal, and dark brown boots that gleamed. He looked every inch the prince he was, styled in the highest of fashion. With my battle-worn and blood-flecked clothing and lack of a bathing chamber visit, I knew I looked wildly out of place. I didn't care. Only one thing was on my mind at the moment: the portal.

Envy and I walked through the parted crowd of sneering courtiers, all dressed impeccably, like each demon court I'd visited. Each of these demons had nearly perfect features, making me wonder if their eerie perfection was the result of magical enhancements, not a result

of nature. It also made me think of the scar their prince had on his lips; how he probably had the option to conceal it but chose not to. Which made me wonder how he'd gotten it once more.

"Some of us take pride in our appearance," the prince of this circle said, almost answering my thoughts. I schooled my features into an unreadable mask. Pride looked down his nose at me, his lip curling from either the blood or—more likely—the shredded material of my gown. "Not all of us, clearly. Though I suppose as an unofficial member of Wrath's court, you don't count."

"It's lovely to see you again, too. Thank you for the warm welcome." I dropped the severed head on the floor, enjoying the hiss of disapproval coming from the courtiers as it rolled to the base of his throne and crashed to a stop. "And some of us spend our time doing more than sitting in fancy chairs, pretending to be drunk and looking pretty."

"I don't simply *look* pretty. I am dashing," he said arrogantly. I fought the urge to roll my eyes at his vanity. "To what do I owe the honor of this unannounced visit?"

"I need access to a portal on the outskirts of your land."

"For what purpose?"

"To bring my husband back to his House of Sin."

Pride glanced at my hand; if he noticed the *SEMPER TVVS* tattoo on my finger or recognized what it was, he didn't let it show. "Perhaps it's for the best that he remain where he is."

My fury started rising, erasing all other emotions. Like diplomacy and civility. Envy cleared his throat, but I did not heed his warning. I was tired, the claw wound burned miserably, and I was a breath away from either crying or screaming or some mad combination of the two.

"If you do not allow me to pass, I will return. And when I come back, I'll have the might of House Wrath's army. No one will keep me from him. Not you. Not my sister. Not any other cursed creature in this realm or any other. If I come back, I will unleash my power. I will burn all you hold dear. That, I can promise, is no threat." I dragged my blade across my palm, letting blood drop all over his beautiful floors. He watched, his brows rising slightly. "It's a vow."

"Making a blood vow is serious in this realm."

"I am well aware."

"I don't think you—"

Pride's head whipped toward the throne room door, and a second later, I heard it. The sound of an impending storm. Footsteps echoed like thunder. The temperature plummeted. Heeled shoes clattered over the marble floor as several courtiers rushed to the exit, their steps echoing as the sound of sleet suddenly smashed against the windows.

I glanced at the arched window behind Pride, noting the sky was

now an ink black. Wind howled, more menacing than any werewolf could hope to be. The very walls shook with the next gust outside. A mirror cracked from the sudden coating of ice.

My heartbeat ticked faster, and I slowly turned, hope igniting deep within. Unlike the rest of this court, it wasn't fear pounding furiously in my chest. A courtier ran toward the dais, a golden crown nestled on a crushed velvet pillow. He placed it on Pride, then backed away, nearly tripping over his feet as the doors crashed open, shattering against the wall.

Smoke and snow swirled into the room. And then Wrath was there. Striding into the chamber with an expression of murder on his handsome face. His attention shot to me, softening for the briefest moment, before he noticed the claw marks down my chest, looking just as bad—if not worse—as the last time he'd seen them. He turned that frigid gaze back on his brothers, and another icy blast circled the room. I wanted to rush over to him, yank him close, and kiss him senseless. I settled for remaining as controlled as he was. Though inside I was battling the desire to make sure he was as unharmed as he appeared to be.

"Explain." Wrath's voice promised violence. "Now."

An explanation for how my prince made it here was exactly what I desired, too, but our conversation would have to wait until we could speak privately. What had been left of Pride's court fled the room, not bothering to stay and witness what promised to be quite the show. The prince of this circle watched as the last one rushed off and left me and the three demon princes to our private battle. Pride gave his brother a haughty look.

"You didn't think I'd simply welcome a queen without first testing her loyalty, did you?" Pride said, ignoring the anger rolling off Wrath in waves. "Your judgment hasn't always been the best where she's concerned. We all have a right to know her true motives this time."

This time? Testing my loyalty? I still didn't know what transpired before my spell-lock, but the more I gathered, the more I knew Vittoria and I had schemed against Pride and Wrath in the past.

"This was a test?" I asked, looking between Pride and Envy. "All of it?"

"Not quite *all*. I told you I choose myself over all else. And this benefited me." Envy shrugged. "It was his idea. Except it didn't quite go as we'd planned. Still, a test was necessary, given what happened… before."

"How comforting." I pressed my lips together, furious that the curse wouldn't allow for more details and that my memories were still under siege. "What was your original 'test'? Have *you* been working with Vittoria? Did she even kidnap you, or was that a fabrication as

well?"

Envy didn't bother looking to Pride or Wrath but instead met my hurt stare. "Once your carriage left Greed's, we were going to send the Umbra demons after Wrath again. Our plan was to see how far you'd go to rescue him. You may say that you love him now, but your motivations haven't historically been so… noble. The Umbra demons worked quite nicely last time. I'd been leaving here to gather my forces, but then your sister showed up and ripped out my heart. I ended up in that cage, and here we are. Reunited."

I glanced at Pride. "And you didn't bother to help him?"

"Envy being removed from my circle suited me well enough. Plus, there was little time to act. She'd grabbed him and immediately had a wolf take him to the Shadow Realm."

"Vittoria could have hurt him."

Pride's gaze darkened. "Your sister does have an impressive record of hurting others."

Wrath slowly took the steps leading up to his brother's gilded throne. I hadn't noticed before, but the chair was fashioned like a lion. The great beast's legs and claws were the arms of the chair, and his head and mane were the back. The lion's mouth was open as if roaring.

My prince towered over Pride, who still managed to sit indolently. "I don't give a shit about your test. Vittoria brought wolves onto our land; you should have stopped her."

"It's not as if I asked her to do so, and it ultimately served my needs." Pride's voice turned hard. "Just like how Envy was aware she'd traveled to the vampire court in the south, doing the devil knows what, and didn't bother telling anyone except Greed. You know how prickly they've gotten. Rumor has it they are plotting. And our dear brother here didn't share any of that, did you?" he flung at Envy. "So why am I being raked over the coals for serving my best interests?"

Envy smiled. "Are you jealous Vittoria went to the vampire prince instead of seeing you?"

"*Stop*," Wrath said. "Our land was breeched by wolves. Vittoria is stirring up discord with vampires none of us need. She ripped out Envy's heart, potentially killed Greed's commander or aided her in escaping, poisoned me, and kidnapped my wife. And this little test of yours seemed justified? All while we are trying to solve a murder to avoid an internal war?" Wrath looked ready to strike his brother off the throne. I was surprised when he didn't. "You not only gambled with my wife's safety, but with the peace of our land."

"And I'd do it again. Now we know for certain Emilia isn't scheming against us. Or you. The end justified the means, whether or

not you like it. Tell me," Pride went on, rising to his feet, "there wasn't a seed of doubt in your mind. Not *one*." Wrath's jaw tightened, but he didn't deny the accusation. "Now you know."

My husband glanced at me, and I straightened my spine. I had doubted him. For months. I could not fault him for any doubts he might harbor for me in return. What mattered now was building our new future. Together. The foundation was there, and with some work, we could make it in the end. The longer Wrath held my gaze, the more uncertainty started to creep in. *It would be all right, wouldn't it?* Surely this was a temporary hurdle we'd overcome. It had to be. My husband's forbidding expression eased. But Pride's voice broke the moment.

"Besides, I refuse to believe we're all going to allow one miserable goddess to succeed in sowing discord among us. Let her try with the wolves and vampires. If Greed is irked that my test might have inadvertently taken you away for *one* night from his boring investigation, he will simply need to get over it. Everyone knows Vesta was unhappy there. He's just angry he lost something valuable. You know how pissy he gets when a gamble goes wrong for him."

Despite my anger at being deceived by these princes of Hell, I recognized this as an opportunity to potentially gain valuable information. "How do you know Vesta was unhappy?" I asked. "Do you have spies at other courts?"

Pride's expression turned as wicked as the gleam in his eye. "Pillow talk, darling. People tell me all sorts of interesting things after I grace their sheets."

"Who told you about her?" I pressed.

"She did, naturally."

I drew up short. That was quite an unexpected answer. The princes couldn't lie, so he had to be telling the truth. "When?"

Pride lifted a shoulder. "Maybe a week or so ago? I can't recall."

Envy pinched the bridge of his nose. "You fucked Greed's commander. Are you that daft?"

"She sought *me* out, for your information," Pride snapped. "She couldn't keep her eyes off me, and I returned the favor, lest I damage her ego."

"And then she was murdered," I said, my tone hard. "Do you think Greed would harm her if he believed she gave you private House information?"

"Of course not." Pride didn't sound as sure.

Wrath studied his brother intently. "How did you end up in the same place together?"

"She came here. To one of my gatherings." Pride glared at us. "What? I received an official request from House Greed for her to

attend. Didn't he tell you?"

Wrath and I looked at each other. Greed had not mentioned anything at all about sending his commander to a rival demon court. "You said she sought you out," I started, mind spinning. "What did she wish to talk about?"

Pride shrugged. "Mundane things. The ball. The wine. The portal. My bedroom."

"What was her interest in the portal?" I asked, sensing we were close to unearthing a clue.

"The same as anyone's," Pride snapped. "She wanted to know if it was secure and if it only went to the Shifting Isles. As if I'd leave something like that unattended."

"Was there anything she said, anything at all, that might have been peculiar or out of place?"

"We didn't do much talking after that." Pride gave me a hard look. "If you're through interrogating me, I'd really like a bottle of wine. This evening has turned rather dark."

My chest suddenly ached again, reminding me of my injury. I wanted to interrogate the idiotic prince more but needed to tend to my wound. And Pride seemed to need a break—his anger was growing, and it was never a good thing to push a prince to feeling another sin.

Wrath strode down the steps toward me, not missing anything. "Let's go home, my lady."

Without looking at Envy or Pride, I accepted Wrath's arm and held on as he magicked us away. With this new information, it was becoming harder to convince myself that Vesta was truly dead. Was it possible she had betrayed Greed and taken up with my sister and the wolves?

I couldn't be sure now, but I would certainly find out. If I asked enough questions, I'd eventually get answers to this growing mystery. And if I made a few enemies, it would be a small price to pay.

TWELVE

Wrath didn't take us to his bedchamber or mine. He didn't even take us to a bathing chamber to remove the dirt and blood. When we emerged from the smoke of his demon magic, we were standing on the glittering shore of the Crescent Shallows.

Steam rose from the ice-blue surface, inviting us to dive into its deceptively peaceful-looking waters. Nothing "made" could enter the magical water or else it would kill. Plenty of bones jutted out of the shallows like the hulls of broken ships to prove death was no old wives' tale. Despite its gruesome appetite, there was something serene about the underground lagoon.

The prince turned me until I faced him, then gingerly reached for the front of my gown, peeling it back to get a better look at my wound.

I hissed through my teeth as the material suctioned to my cut gave way to Wrath's gentle prompting, taking some skin with it and causing it to reopen. It oozed and bled.

Wrath winced as if my pain were his own. "This is infected."

"Where were you?" I asked, unable to wait another second to know. I ran my hands over him, relieved to find him whole and healthy. Not that I'd see any indication he'd been hurt with his ability to heal quickly. "How did you escape? And what about the poison?"

Wrath looked like the poisoning and stabbing he'd just been through were the least of our concerns at the moment, but it was greatly important to *me*.

He sighed and withdrew a small vial from his pocket, holding it up. The liquid shimmered like a morning sky on my island, a crystal clear blue.

"Celestia is very talented at creating tonics and tinctures." He

pocketed the tiny vial. “I always carry something as a precaution. I took it as soon as I could, then left your sister’s temple when the wolves shifted back to human form. The gates were spelled shut, so it took some time for me to get to the portal that leads to Pride’s circle.”

“Couldn’t you *transvenio* there?”

Wrath shook his head. “Magic cannot be used to travel there, so I had to go on foot.”

I thought about Envy and Pride’s test and the jab the Umbra demon uttered before I’d killed it. I had well and truly made enemies here. “What did I do to you… before?”

“Nothing.” Wrath’s face went perfectly blank. “Don’t worry about Envy or Pride’s foolishness. They shouldn’t have tested you or your loyalty.”

“If I betrayed you, that’s not nothing.”

He glared down at the claw marks as if they personally offended him, promptly avoiding the subject. Which made me think perhaps his brothers *did* have cause to test me. “I should have ripped that wolf’s spine out and shoved it down its throat. Made it suffer for every ounce of pain it inflicted upon you.”

He certainly didn’t lack imagination. To mitigate the anger I saw rising in him, I nodded toward the sparkling water. “I thought this was off-limits for me, given what happened last time.”

Last time, I’d felt as if my heart were about to stop; the pain had been so acute, so terrible, he’d taken me directly to the Matron of Curses and Poisons, my mother unbeknownst to me at that time. She’d crafted a tonic for me, and all had been well. As far as I knew, she was still holding Vittoria underground for the time being, and I wasn’t thrilled by the prospect of having a similar reaction without her nearby.

Wrath drew me closer so he could inspect my wound again, his gaze icy and hard.

“It wasn’t you; it was my wings. The magic that binds them reacted against the spell-lock that obscures your memories. When combined, there were too many magics at play, and the waters acted as if both were threats.” He took in the uncertainty in my face. “I had Celestia research more about it. She doesn’t think you’ll have an issue if you reenter the water. The healing properties should work now, as they were always meant to. If I thought otherwise, I’d not chance it.”

A story came back to me. One Celestia had mentioned that night. About the water belonging to the goddesses and trying to take back what was theirs. Wrath had called it a folktale and told her to stop spreading lies. I looked from the water to him, trying to puzzle it out. Something didn’t quite make sense… something—

“Strip.” Wrath stepped back and nodded to my gown. He shrugged

out of his shirt and undid the button on his trousers. His devious lips curled at the edges, like he knew exactly where my thoughts had traveled with that one word. “Let’s get into the water and heal that wound before it gets worse.”

“I *am* immortal, aren’t I?”

“Not fully. At least not yet.” He held out his hand, encouraging me to step into the water I remembered being as warm as a bath. “Come join me, my lady. Please.”

I recalled he’d once said there were truth properties to the shallows. Right now, I wanted some truth from him as much as I wanted to heal. I stepped to the edge of the glittering dark sand and let the ice-blue water lap at my toes. The lagoon was magical, enchanting. It called to me.

Wrath moved back, going a little deeper, to make room. I followed him in and took his hand, relishing the tiny bubbles that fizzled pleasantly across my skin.

We waded out until my chest was fully submerged and the magic of the water began tending to my wounds. It felt incredible. And a little odd as the magic cleansed my cuts, then knit my skin together. Even the wound I’d made when I’d sworn a blood vow in Pride’s throne room healed. Any momentary discomfort vanished almost as quickly as it appeared.

Wrath watched the magical water work, concern present in his normally stoic features. He looked ready to jump in and attack at the first sign of trouble. “Better?”

I glanced down, pleased to see the wound had healed. Faint silver lines remained, but the scar didn’t trouble me. Not half as much as the secret I feared Wrath was still keeping. “Much.”

My husband tentatively reached over and dragged a finger over my flesh, checking to make sure it was well and truly healed. I looked over his shoulder, admiring the moon phases painted along the cavern’s walls while he continued his thorough inspection. I had wondered before if he’d painted the celestial scene but couldn’t picture him spending hours with a paintbrush or bucket of paint. Though he often surprised me. Perhaps he had.

“Is there a reason you keep saving my life when it’s not exactly in danger?” I looked at him again, waiting. “I imagine there must be something that worries you.”

Wrath circled me, the waves from his movements gently breaking against the shore. I wasn’t sure if the curse made it difficult for him to speak or if he was purposely picking and choosing what he’d share with me. “As far as I know, if your heart stops now, while you’re not entirely immortal, it could kill you. Until I know for certain, it’s a risk I refuse to take.”

“Envy said a drop of immortality wins out against mortality every time.” Though I left out the part where Envy had also been concerned if that were entirely true.

“Are you that willing to give up your heart to find out?” he asked.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, needing the physical contact. His arms went around my waist automatically, anchoring me against him, solid and comforting. We’d been through hell, and I wanted a reminder that we were here, together. Safe. He dipped his face and captured my mouth with his, the kiss hungry and filled with raw, powerful emotion.

When we finally broke apart, breathing hard, our lips pleasantly swollen, I grinned. “For you? I’d give my heart up.”

He looked at me, his expression hard to read. And I wondered if maybe he wasn’t quite ready to give me his heart in return, that even though we were now mostly married, perhaps all the demons from our past hadn’t yet been banished. Maybe that’s why he hadn’t mentioned anything about us completing the ceremony that would seal our marriage for good.

Granted, there hadn’t been much time to discuss it before we were attacked by wolves and separated, but still. Before I could worry over it, Wrath’s mouth slanted over mine again, like his very life depended on the connection.

His tongue demanded entry, and I parted my lips for him, welcoming his taste. Wrath’s kisses were certainly intoxicating. Each expert flick or tease of his tongue against mine had my body craving other unspeakable things he could do with that wicked mouth.

Heat pooled low in my belly, stirring my desires as it slowly spread. Soon all I could focus on were his hands as they lazily moved from my waist to my ribs, his thumbs brushing the underside of my breasts. He palmed one as he moved his mouth to my throat, the sensation causing the little bud to harden as a shiver of pleasure went through me.

Roughened hands glided up and down my spine, his caress light and gentle and maddening in the best of ways. He was touching me like I was precious, like each embrace was a moment to cherish, to indulge in and savor. And it was. For him, he knew what it was like to have this end, to have me wrenched away. It had been a mercy that I couldn’t recall that.

I touched him back as languidly, exploring every inch of his warrior’s body like it was uncharted territory that belonged only to me. I would never allow someone to rip us apart again. And I’d fight with everything I had to remember him and what we’d shared.

He broke away from the kiss, his gaze darkening as he dragged it from my eyes downward, watching as I touched his sides and

powerful back, my inquisitive hands searching for a way to evoke ecstasy for him. They dipped beneath the water again, skirting over his sex to play with the toned muscle of his thighs before I curled my hand around his thick length and pumped. Wrath's breathing turned sharp as I stroked him, his mouth parting on a groan.

I tightened my grip, feeling his sex respond enthusiastically as it twitched against my palm. When I slowly ran my hands back up to his chest, he drew me against him and began kissing and biting along my neck with ravenous hunger.

"I want to be inside you." His hands drifted down, cupping the swell of my bottom and squeezing. I melted into the feeling of the fizzing water and his sizzling touches. His rock-hard length pressed between us, causing my own flesh to pulse with need. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too." I sank my fingers into his hair as Wrath brought his mouth to my breasts, licking and suckling the peaks in a rhythm that had me arching against him, seeking the feeling of him between my thighs. "I was about to destroy the realm to find you," I admitted. Wrath suddenly dipped below the water, then wrapped his arms around my waist, standing up with me perched on his shoulders. "Samael!"

I grabbed onto his head from the swift movement, earning a deep chuckle from the prince. With me secured in his strong grip, he waded over to a cave wall that had a group of stalactites hanging close to it. I braced my back against the smooth stone wall, still holding on to Wrath.

"Grab onto them." His voice was husky, low. Desire rolled through me.

With my thighs wrapped around his shoulders and his mouth tantalizingly close to my apex, I did as he commanded. I'd just grabbed the stalactites and anchored myself when he hooked his arms around me and spread my legs a little wider. My breath caught from being on display, and a flash of lingering mortal modesty had my legs automatically trying to close.

Wrath flashed a sly grin, then licked my core with long, soft strokes. It was so delicate, so intimate, I had to bite my lip to keep from moaning while he worshipped me. I forgot all about any embarrassment; Wrath made me feel wholly comfortable.

Our last joining had been explosive; the first time he'd tasted me had been fueled by unbridled passion. This… *this* was a true religious experience.

Wrath devoted himself to my pleasure, and I fully surrendered to him. I tilted my head back, breathing hard as he continued his slow, tantalizing tasting. He didn't rush, didn't roughly suck or tease. He made love to me with his warm, wet tongue, allowing it to say

everything he couldn't or wouldn't as it dipped inside me.

When I got close to falling over the edge of pleasure, he pressed openmouthed kisses along my inner thighs, and it was the best sort of torture as I waited for him to return to that aching spot, to the swollen bundle of nerves that would soon have me calling his true name.

"Touch yourself, my lady." His voice was an erotic purr, and his request…

Without breaking his stare, I trailed one hand down my own body, teasing him before slipping a finger inside. Wrath's mouth was on me again in an instant, licking my sex and my fingers while I continued to touch myself, and in seconds I was calling out his name again.

I repeated it like a whispered prayer, and he continued his own faithful worshipping until the last of my climax rolled through me, leaving my legs shaking and my chest heaving.

And craving more. Goddess curse me. I couldn't get enough of him. Wrath kissed his way up my body as he slowly lowered me back down, our slick skin sliding against each other its own euphoric experience. Wrath ran a finger over his lips, then he lifted my hand as if he were about to press a gentlemanly kiss to it. His gaze turned molten as he brought my finger to his mouth and sucked. I cursed, and he flashed a grin that was all masculine smugness. The mighty hunter just conquered his prey, and I hadn't even put up a fight.

"You're about to start whispering all sorts of filthy curses, my lady." He moved until he'd caged my body between him and the smooth stone at my back. Impossibly, my desire for the demon grew. "This time, Emilia, I'm going to go slow."

Wrath kissed me lightly, then moved his mouth across my jaw in another whisper-soft caress. He pressed the blunt end of his arousal against my swollen entrance and slid it back and forth until I whimpered from pleasure. "Oh, goddess above."

My seductive prince ran one calloused hand down my side, slowly hoisting my leg up. With his other hand, he continued his delightful torture, driving us both wild. What started as a way to get me closer to that glorious edge now seemed to have the same effect on him. Wrath sheathed himself with one magnificent thrust. He drew back to look me in the eye as he pulled out, then slid in. Each movement and joining of our bodies was slow, languid.

The damned demon was right; I started cursing, the filthy words encouraging him to continue. His hand cupped my jaw as he covered my mouth with his and deepened our kiss. My fingers dug into his shoulders as I clenched around him.

Wrath brought those wicked lips to my ear. "You're close?"

"Yes."

"Thank fuck."

His hand slid between our bodies, and he placed his thumb against my sex, increasing the timing on his thrusts, adding more pressure to that spot that sent a hot ripple through me.

I climaxed again, his true name flying from my tongue. He withdrew and thrust in deeper, a little faster this time, my own name slipping from his lips. Before I had time to come down from the soaring heights of my last release, Wrath had me climbing that same pleasure peak again. Soon we were both panting, our lips and breath mingling.

"You're *mine*." His voice was rough, deep.

"Just as you are mine. Forever." Wrath hitched my leg a little higher, and I gripped his shoulders, a moan escaping me. My responses had him working even harder. He thrusted again and again, pleasure steadily building until I thought I'd combust. My body throbbed, and I could no longer hold myself back from the tidal wave of pleasure that broke. "Samael!"

He rode me through my orgasm, then joined me, my name shouted into the cave, bouncing back at us. We caught our breath, hearts pounding as he kissed me gently and lowered my leg. It prickled a little; I'd been so caught up in pleasure I hadn't noticed it had gone numb.

My husband rubbed my aching calf muscle, searching my eyes. "Are you still here with me?"

The warmth of the water, the feeling of Wrath against me, cradling me. I hadn't once drifted into another time or place. "I am."

Relief flashed in the demon's eyes, and I wondered if he'd always seemed so tense when we'd kissed or had been physical. "Let's go to bed, my lady."

Instead of swimming to the shore, Wrath scooped me into his arms, splashing me playfully in the process. It felt so good to just laugh, to not feel the weight of the world for once. Down here, with my prince, I didn't have to think of betrayal or murder. Fear and darkness. Down here, within the magical lagoon under House Wrath, only love existed.

I wriggled out of his arms and dove under the water, exploding near him and earning a surprised chuckle when I succeeded in my return fire.

Afterward, we fell onto the glittering dark sand, and I pounced on my husband, who didn't seem to mind one bit as I guided his length into me. Once we were tired from laughing and making love on the shore, Wrath magicked us back to his bedchamber. A beautiful pale lavender slip was folded on a pillow, and when I pulled it over my head and shimmied it down my body, I noticed the tiny gold stars across the top. It was soft and feminine, and I adored it.

Wrath gave me an appreciative look. The slip hit at midthigh, showing off my bronze skin. If I wasn't so exhausted from our ordeal, I'd have been tempted to take him once more. He patted the bed, a debauched twinkle in his eye. "Save your energy for morning. You'll certainly need it."

With the promise of waking up and making wild, untamed love, I climbed onto the massive bed. Wrath tucked me against his body, and within moments, his breathing turned deep and even. I relaxed into his embrace and closed my eyes. Peace. I couldn't recall the last time I felt so settled on the inside. There was still much chaos in the world, but in here, in this bedchamber and moment, I knew the true meaning of the word. Perhaps it was that sense of security that was my undoing. I'd forgotten, for a brief moment, what it meant to be cursed.

From one second to the next, I was magically wrenched from Wrath's bedchamber. And the next nightmare began.

THIRTEEN

"Welcome back, princess." Domenico bared his teeth in what no one would mistake as a smile. A quick survey of my surroundings confirmed my fears. Once again, I was in the Shadow Realm, chained. It was the same small stone chamber, the same alcove with manacles.

This time, at least, I had a slip on and wouldn't need a shadow robe. It was the only positive bit of luck. They'd struck while Wrath was asleep, and it would likely be hours before he woke up and found my soul gone. Given his extreme reaction before, they better hope he remained sleeping. I didn't bother testing the chains. I already felt that same bite of magic, locking my powers away. I glanced at my captor, hating the smug look on his face.

"I assume this means my sister would like to talk."

"Maybe I just wanted to see if you still bore my mark." The werewolf raked his gaze over me, pausing on my chest. It wasn't sexual in nature, but I didn't like it, either. "Did you know, a wound from an alpha can sometimes cause a feeling similar to what animals experience when they go into heat? Especially if that alpha infused his bite with a bit of magic and intent."

"I wasn't wounded by you, I was clawed."

"And who sank his teeth into that wound? Not your demon," he said, his tone mocking. "Have any animallike urges, lately? Perhaps you wished to get on all fours."

"No. And you're disgusting."

He laughed, and it raised the hair along my arms. "Don't worry. I didn't actually infuse you with an alpha mark. And I have no desire to touch anything tainted by demon cock."

I refrained from pointing out that my twin had also slept with demons. And vampires. And whoever else ignited her desires, as was

perfectly customary here. “Where is Vittoria?”

“She’s bringing a guest. You would have known sooner, before we were interrupted by your mother.” He casually leaned against the wall in the alcove, entirely too close for my liking. “This promises to be quite the evening. Maybe if you’re very nice, I’ll unchain you.”

“How did Vittoria escape our mother?”

Domenico’s smile was all teeth again. “You didn’t really think the Crone would hold her for long, did you? She had other tasks to accomplish, and once you were safely away, she left.”

I was spared from further conversation by the sound of approaching footsteps. Two sets. One pair was measured, unhurried; the other sounded as if they were being dragged. Trepidation rolled down my spine. Whoever else was coming was also doing so against their will.

Vittoria strode into the chamber and shoved her “guest” forward.

The older woman stumbled into the candlelight, and fear became an arrow that was shot straight into my heart.

“Nonna!” I struggled against my chains. My grandmother—who wasn’t truly my grandmother—was bruised and badly beaten. Her bottom lip was swollen as if she’d been hit with either a fist or hard object. Dried blood caked her temple. No matter what she might have done, seeing her hurt made something violent wake up inside me. “Let her go, Vittoria.”

My sister flung her onto the floor, then glanced at me. “There. I let her go. Happy now?”

I turned my attention on Nonna, and she finally looked at me in return. Sadness and… worry… marred her features. She took in my night clothing, the *SEMPER TVVS* tattoo on my finger and the other tattoo on my forearm, my chains, and still, she cringed back.

As if *I* were the monster in the room and my sister hadn’t either beaten her or had her beaten and dragged to the Shadow Realm.

I swallowed the rising lump in my throat. “Nonna. It’s all right. It’s *me*.”

Vittoria watched my reaction with a detached look. Then she kicked our grandmother in the side, forcing her to curl in on herself, to gasp for breath. I shouted for mercy, but no one seemed to notice. Nonna’s lips started moving, and I realized it wasn’t a spell she was whispering, she was praying. Her words washed over me; she was begging the ultimate divine goddess above for protection. From us. Something twisted in my center, painful and unpleasant.

“You didn’t want to believe me earlier”—Vitoria thrust her arm out in accusation—“so here is your proof. She’s not rushing to your aid. Nor is she praying *for* you, though you’re the one in chains. She is only out for herself. Tigers don’t change their stripes, and she is not

the little house cat she pretends to be. Have you tried leaving this realm lately? Run into any difficulty, dear sister? I imagine you did, because I found her hexing the gates."

I released a shaky breath. Nonna stopped praying and met my gaze again. This time a spark lit her dark eyes. Defiance. Vittoria was correct. My grandmother wasn't sorry, nor would she deign to apologize to an enemy. And that's exactly what she thought of us. Of *me*.

What had been left of my stolen heart broke.

"Why?" I asked, my voice quiet, brittle. "Was anything of our childhood real?"

For the briefest moment, Nonna's expression softened. The grandmother I'd known emerged, kind yet fierce. Protective and loving. Here was the woman who'd comforted me when my twin "died." Here was the rock in my world, the steady force anchoring me during the worst storm I'd been through. Or so I'd thought. Here was one of the people who'd betrayed me. And yet I couldn't find it in my soul to hate her. Even now. Which meant their spell-lock had succeeded. I might still be a goddess underneath the curse, but I now felt as mortals did.

"I'm sorry, bambina." Nonna's voice warbled. "We did what needed to be done."

Tears I'd managed to hold back burst out in a torrent. They streamed down my face, the salt coating my lips. It was true. Every wicked, dark thing Vittoria claimed.

I drew in a ragged breath, trying desperately to get myself under control. I needed to understand how someone who'd loved me as their own grandchild could betray me. I needed to hear her admit she'd murdered others for their hearts. Goddess above.

I couldn't begin to process that part. "You used the darkest of magic to bind us. How could you resort to human sacrifice?"

My grandmother, who now felt like a ruthless stranger to me, thought it over for a moment.

"Wartime is rife with sacrifice. Humans understand that just like witches." Nonna said it without emotion, as if she were reciting ingredients for a spell or recipe. "Two lives for the whole coven… it's what the elders agreed upon."

My stomach twisted in knots. I felt gutted. There was no remorse, no sadness, only cold justification for evil. "Who did the coven murder for their hearts?"

Vittoria stepped in, her lavender eyes alight with dark glee. "She's jumping to the *end* of the tale when, truly, you must hear it from the beginning." She glared down at Nonna. "Set the stage properly. Or your use to me this evening has run its course. Tell her about Sofia.

Your friend."

"Sofia Santorini?" I asked, already dreading what I was about to discover. "What did you do to her?"

Nonna pushed herself to a sitting position, her breathing labored. I wondered if Vittoria bruised or broke one of her ribs. My sister yanked her up and thrust her into a chair that materialized from nowhere. In mere seconds, Vittoria had her chained, too.

Despite everything Nonna had done, I tried breaking free to help her, but there was no escaping my own restraints.

"Go on, tell her," Vittoria demanded, bending down to whisper in her ear. "Or I'll force you."

"I caught her scrying in Death's temple. So I made sure the information she learned never left that chamber. There were certain… truths, only me and one other council member were trusted with. We were told to keep the secret at all costs."

"So you trapped her mind for nearly two decades?" I asked, disbelief apparent in my tone.

"If she hadn't gone against the council, if she hadn't unearthed our secrets, she would have never been subjected to that punishment."

She spoke as if discovering the truth justified her and the council's actions. Horrified was only a fraction of the emotion I now felt.

Nonna drew herself up, a stubborn tilt to her chin as she held my gaze. Her look said she was telling me because she wanted to, not because my twin was forcing her hand. It was difficult to imagine the tears in Nonna's eyes the night I'd discovered Vittoria's body. Where there once was love, hatred burned between them now, bright and all-consuming. I couldn't believe she was capable of cursing her own friend, then using her as a cautionary tale all our lives.

"Now tell her about her prince," Vittoria said. "Don't leave anything out."

"In the beginning, the Prince of Wrath was cursed to forget all but his hate," Nonna said, her voice clipped. Not from anger, but pain. Her breath rasped with each inhale and exhale. "The First Witch told him whatever he loved would be taken from him. At that time, he didn't care for anything, save his wings. That was before he met you." Nonna sucked in another ragged breath. "He cursed her right back, promising to take something she loved in return if she didn't return his wings. So La Prima Strega made a bargain with the devil. No one knows the exact terms. She'd set her spell using her blood, made a sacrifice to the goddess, and was overly confident in her abilities. She forgot whom she'd been dealing with."

She let that sink in and settle. It was a tangled web with many threads winding and twining together until they were so knotted it felt impossible to cut through. Two curses converged, and our lives were

caught in between.

"Our curse… part of it was because of the First Witch?" I asked.

Nonna nodded. "You know the first part of the story—that Pride once had a wife who was the daughter of the First Witch. La Prima wanted her daughter back, free from the demon prince, so she came up with a plan to pit Wrath and Pride against each other. She made a bargain with House Vengeance."

"For a price, naturally," Vittoria added, her tone cold.

A memory was rising to the surface. I still couldn't remember who the First Witch was, but I had a strong sense of *what* she'd wanted. "We were pretending to be one person." Vittoria nodded, encouraging me to push forward. To fight to reclaim memories that belonged to me. The magic binding me, it was struggling. I felt for the thread of power that belonged to Wrath and tugged it hard, allowing it to break a little more of the curse. It was stubborn, resisted, but my husband's power was too strong. Another crack split open, freeing a memory. "I was sent to Wrath; my mission was to seduce him."

Something like relief crossed my twin's features.

"And I was sent to Pride with the same mission," Vittoria confirmed. "At the Feast of the Wolf, Wrath was meant to walk in on me and Pride, thinking it was you. The First Witch wanted a war to break out. She wanted her daughter to see that Pride wasn't serious about her, had never been, if he publicly fought his brother over someone else."

"She wanted to break her daughter's heart." I felt sick. It was a cruel game. A scheme that had destroyed so many lives. All because the First Witch didn't want to lose her daughter to a demon. And I'd played a part in it. I'd never hated myself more. "And Wrath? What happened?"

"He gave you *his* heart. He'd caught on to the scheme and didn't care. The night you were meant to leave and let me finish our mission at the Feast, from what my spies have gathered, you sneaked back to him. You pulled him aside at the party, dragged him off for a tryst. When I was trying to seduce Pride, you were in the garden with him, where he confessed his love."

Wrath had… Goddess above. Chills erupted over my body. Wrath, the fearsome general of war, had made himself vulnerable. Likely for the first time in his long existence. And then all hell had broken loose. I exhaled a shaky breath. All these years, he'd been cursed to hate me. Yet he'd fought against it. Tried to latch on to the good. No wonder he was hesitant to give me his heart now. The one time he'd given himself wholly, he'd been punished.

"Before he told me he loved me, I confessed everything that night," I said, suddenly recalling the midnight garden. The night-

blooming flowers, the crescent moon. I remembered thinking it was smiling down on us. Now I wonder if it was in mockery. “Somehow, during our game, my feelings changed. I couldn’t go through with the plan. I loved him. So I dragged him away before he could see you and Pride.”

“I’m not sure what happened between you two then,” Vittoria continued. “My spies weren’t close enough. All I know is that within the next moment or two, you were gone. There was blood. Some torn-out hair. But nothing else. Wrath went ballistic. He stormed into the castle and nearly destroyed his brothers, convinced one of them had been behind the attack. At that time, no one knew what struck you. Umbra demons were blamed, hired by someone. Envy was the prime suspect, though I know for certain he’d left the party well before the bloodbath began. Then Wrath focused on Greed, and finally Pride.”

Vittoria closed her eyes, as if reliving the memory of that night. I wasn’t there, but it was easy to imagine Wrath detonating. The chaos, the fear. The raw, unchecked power of his sin seeking to destroy as he unsuccessfully searched for me.

My sister looked at me, and maybe it was the memory of that night, or some mortal piece of her finally slipping through, but she signaled to Domenico—who I’d forgotten was still leaning against the wall—and he magicked my restraints away. They fell to the floor in a heap of metal. It was only through sheer force of will that I didn’t follow them down to the ground.

“While the bloodbath between princes continued to rage, I went to find you. Wrath had revealed to everyone that we were twins, so our scheme was over, and even if it wasn’t, I wouldn’t abandon you,” Vittoria said, her voice softening. “It didn’t take long to find you, but I’d been too late. Once the witches had you, they moved quickly. The twin witches who had been born? They sacrificed them immediately. Kept their hearts pumping through magic.”

“What?” Chills raced along my spine. Another realization clicked into place. I glanced at Nonna, who finally looked regretful. “The prophecy of the twin witches wasn’t about us.”

Vittoria shook her head. “It never was. The prophecy of the twin witches simply says that they would be sacrificed—we are not those witches. Yes, twin witches—babies—were born that night, and the Star Witches sacrificed them and took their hearts. They put those hearts inside of us and created our spell-locks. We were infused with *their* mortality.”

“Nonna raised them, raised us,” I said, still reeling. I gave my grandmother a horrified look. “You were in our earliest memories. You taught us to bless our amulets. You taught us to cook.” I rubbed my hands over my arms. The chill had turned bone-deep. Our

grandmother had brutally killed two innocent witches. Witches she went on to raise. It was unfathomable. Looking at her now, I was unable to process the mixture of emotions swirling through me. She'd been the ultimate force of good in my life. Had hated everything to do with the dark arts. And all along she'd been the ultimate evil. "How could you? How could you do that to those girls?"

Nonna's fists curled at her sides. "Duty. We all knew a day would come when we'd be forced to sacrifice. They gave up their lives, and we gave up our hearts that day, too. It is our destiny to watch the prison of damnation. To ensure the Wicked and the Feared don't get out. Once the curse had gone into effect, you posed a great threat to our world. You are a vengeance goddess. We did not want to risk your fury once you'd discovered that a witch had taken something so precious from you. The First Witch wouldn't—and couldn't—break her curse, and we acted accordingly."

"All to bind us? Because of hate and fear?" I saw the truth of that in Nonna's eyes, but I also saw something else. Something more complicated. Like perhaps Nonna started to question her duty. Perhaps she'd grown to love us, her enemies. And maybe that was why she filled our heads with lies of the Wicked. With telling us who to fear. One of the warnings she'd told us repeated itself in my mind.

Whatever you do, you must never speak to the Wicked. If you see them, hide. Once you've caught a demon prince's attention, he'll stop at nothing to claim you. They are midnight creatures, born of darkness and moonlight. And they seek only to destroy.…

Knowing what I did now, I understood the true warning. They'd been hiding me from Wrath. They knew he would stop at nothing to claim me, to destroy what the witches had done. He'd bided his time; he'd searched. And even through his hate, he never let that ember of love die.

The story and warning weren't lies. They just weren't *my* truth. Those warnings only belonged to the witches. They did everything in their power to keep us apart. To break our bond. And they failed. I refused to meet my grandmother's pleading stare another moment. I looked at my sister. She might be a monster now, but she wasn't pretending to be anything else.

"I still don't understand one part… how was this scheme to trick Wrath and Pride supposed to work? I know Envy said no spies ever made it to our circle. But didn't the demons know *of* us, even if they'd never been to our House?"

Vittoria uttered a spell, then drew a map in the space between us. It glowed a soft lavender as it hovered before me. My twin pointed to the almost familiar continent. "The underworld bears many similarities to the mortal land of Italy. The upper region,

corresponding to Piemonte, is where lesser demons and ice dragons roam." She moved her hand, and a different area, roughly the location of Tuscany, glowed. "This region is where the princes of Hell reside." She swept the magic along the southern border, approximately in the same location as the region of Campania. "And this is where House Vengeance is. There is a treacherous mountain range here that serves as a nearly impassable barrier to our domain—even for immortals. Within the mountains is a veil of sorts, one that erases memories. Except for ours, our mother's, and anyone we choose to gift with true Sight." My twin pointed out another section. "The vampire court is near the very tip, where Calabria is for humans. And the island of Sicily is nearly identical to the location of the Shifting Isles."

The map faded into the shadows. At least I now understood how the princes—who seemed to know much about everything—were in the dark about us. "I don't understand why we kept ourselves mysterious. For what, centuries? Is there a reason we didn't comingle with the princes?"

Vittoria's expression shifted. It wasn't quite hatred, but there was a coldness about her features that surfaced each time I brought up the princes of Hell. "Demons—especially princes of Hell—cannot be trusted. And are beneath us. We had enough to occupy us in the southern region and had no cause to get involved in their squabbles."

"We were here shortly after the underworld was created," I recalled suddenly.

"And the princes came centuries later, when they were cast from their own realm."

I sensed there was much more to that particular part of our history but left it be for now. Above all else, I needed to understand our current predicament—the curse and how it came to be—if I had any hope of breaking it.

My twin was in a rather giving mood, freely offering information without any magical restraints. I might not have many other opportunities to gather this much information, so I took advantage. "If I was torn away from Wrath, how did you get cursed?"

"Like I said, I came for you." My sister's gaze turned darker than the shadows that slunk into the chamber. She flung a hex at our grandmother, knocking her unconscious. "I hunted you down, and the Star Witches were ready. They set a trap. You were lying on an altar, blood dripping from your chest."

She allowed that punch to land squarely in my gut. It was the exact way I'd found her body in the monastery in Sicily. Now I knew her pose had been by design. It hadn't been a message to me, it had been a warning to Nonna and the witches.

The goddess of death remembered.

“I rushed to you, not noticing the circle of salt and herbs,” she went on. “Uncaring about the spell candles or the arcane symbols glowing all over the walls. Once I crossed the circle, their magic locked me in. It overtook my power, essentially making me mortal for brief moments. Which was all the time they needed to perform their ritual. They chained me down and gave me my own spell-locked heart.”

We stared at each other for a few tense beats. Despite her betrayal, despite the months of anger and torment I felt, I needed my twin. In this moment. I needed our connection. But Vittoria wasn’t mortal. She didn’t fold me in her arms. There were no words of comfort or shared tears. There was only one promise shining in her eyes. *Vengeance.* A vow to set right a terrible wrong.

“That’s when they made us wear the Horn of Hades, further blocking our memories,” I guessed. “And I imagine also hiding us from any of our mother’s tracking spells.”

“Precisely. The spell-lock and amulets both prevented the Crone from locating us. Something the witches also feared.”

Which was why they took extra pains to hide us. Having the Crone, one of the three original goddesses, as an enemy would have posed an even greater threat to their world. I exhaled. Wrath and I hadn’t been sure if that was true about the amulets, but it had been a theory we’d batted around. We wore those amulets to not hide ourselves from the devil, but to hide from our true selves. “And when we’d taken them off, that night… our magic struggled to rise.”

“So you see.” Vittoria walked over to where our grandmother was slumped and unconscious in her chair. “These witches do not deserve your sympathy. They deserve to die. Which is why I went through and started taking their daughters. Let them feel what it was like to lose it all.” Vittoria spun on her heels and met my eyes. “No one binds Death or Fury and lives to tell the tale. They wanted to avoid a war? Well, that’s precisely what they’ll get. I won’t stop until each family responsible has paid. The princes of Hell are no better and ought to have paid a long time ago for their sins. You need to be by my side, taking your rightful revenge. It is the only way House Vengeance can rise again.”

“You’re going to start a war between supernaturals.”

“Start?” Vittoria asked, looking around. “War’s already begun. It started the moment they cursed us and held us captive for nearly twenty years in that realm. It began when that witch cursed the demon you call husband now and dragged us into their issues. All of them have forgotten who we are. What we are capable of. Some battles are not fought with weapons in fields, sister. Some are much more effective when subtle moves are made over time. I don’t

ultimately care if other supernaturals fight; I care only for vengeance for us." She looked down at the woman who'd been our grandmother, her expression going impossibly colder. "Wrath will never give you his heart. He cannot. The curse has not been lifted for him. He will always keep part of himself locked safely away. Once you figure that out, come back to me. We have much to accomplish together. Just as we always did."

"I need you to tell me one thing. Did you kill Greed's commander or help her escape? Pride said she'd been asking about his portal."

"Pride has proved to still care *only* for himself. Just as he always has. And there is much you still don't understand—and will not understand—until you remove your spell-lock." Vittoria ignored my questions and nodded to Domenico. The werewolf stepped forward and made a glittering portal. It was clear my sister wasn't going to talk about the magical skulls or any potential demon murder or escape. And I needed to get back to Wrath before he did something reckless. I looked at Nonna, and a sliver of worry crept in. "What are you going to do with her?"

"Send her back to the coven with a message." I wasn't sure if her bruises *were* the message. Part of me wanted to beg for her life. To show mercy. To prove to everyone I wasn't the monster they feared me to be. But maybe I was. Before I stepped through the portal, my sister said, "If I come to find you again, you will regret it. I expect your assistance soon."

I paused on the magical threshold and leveled a cold look at my twin. "Do not threaten me. And do not ever take me here against my will again. If I want to find you, I'll do so. I have tolerated this because of what I've gained. You have many enemies here; you don't need another."

FOURTEEN

A steely, murderous rage flickered in Wrath's eyes as I jolted up in bed, my soul thrust back into my body. His expression promised unending pain and torment.

Dragging me to the Shadow Realm a second time was a line Vittoria and Domenico clearly shouldn't have crossed. And now the demon of war looked ready to collect his due. Like the vampire court to the south, Wrath was out for blood. Goddess, werewolf, demon, it didn't appear to matter who received the brunt of his sin as long as his enemies paid.

"I'm unharmed," I said, curling onto my side to face him. "Just drained."

Wrath pulled the blankets up over me, then laid a heavy arm around my waist. His silence filled the room, louder and more tense than any words could. Knowing what I did now, about how I'd been wrenched from him in the past, wrenched from *us* just as we'd truly fallen for each other, I could only imagine that what he was feeling now wasn't good. Vittoria was tearing into wounds from the past, and Wrath seemed ready to strike back, to inflict some pain in return.

"I'm here." I rested my hand over his arm, squeezing the hard muscle gently. He was coiled tight enough to snap. I traced the gold serpent tattoo, hoping to soothe him. A quick inspection of the bedchamber proved he hadn't iced it over, which was a good sign. "I'm all right. Truly. I also warned my sister there would be ramifications if she took me again."

He was quiet for another long moment, drawing in a few measured breaths. The room chilled a fraction before he forced himself under control. He ran a gentle hand over my arm, lightly rubbing warmth back into me while making sure I was, indeed,

unharmed.

"Your skin is tinged blue, Emilia. Had you not kicked me awake while showing signs of returning, I would have come for you and obliterated every creature in that realm. I'd have taken you from there, then wiped the entire *realm* from existence."

"Oh." I pulled an arm out from under the covers and glanced at my skin, cringing.

No wonder he was so angry. I looked half dead. I would have been terrified if I had awoken to him looking like a corpse beside me, too. Given the circumstances, his reaction was fairly mild. If any harm came to him, I would have attacked first.

"Your sister is playing a very dangerous game." Wrath's tone was filled with malice.

"I know." I traced small circles on his upper arm. "She's not thinking clearly. Vengeance and retribution are her gods, and she's honoring them regularly."

"What has been so critical for her to share that she cannot wait until you seek her out?"

"I think she senses some of my curse is breaking, and there are cracks where my memories are coming back. She's trying to help me remember so I—"

Wrath turned all his attention on me. "So you what?"

"Vittoria wants to reestablish House Vengeance. She says she means to start a war between witches, demons, and other supernaturals, but I don't necessarily believe that. She certainly hates witches and has a strong dislike for demons, yet her main focus seems to be on restoring our House."

Silence crept into the space between us.

"Is that something you want?" Wrath asked, his tone carefully neutral. "Reestablishing your House?"

"Until I know the full story and regain my memories, I don't want to make that decision." I bit my lower lip. "Is that something that would cause a complication for us? My sister seems to think it would."

"No. I would never stop you from doing anything you wanted. And as long as Vittoria leaves you to your own choices and respects your wishes, I don't give a shit what she does or who she prays to or starts a war with. There's already a price on her head. Greed wants her dead. So do Envy and Pride. Lust and Gluttony can both be swayed easily if it came to war. And Sloth will not go against the majority. I am the only one standing in the way of her total annihilation. And if she takes you against your will again, I will hunt her down. I will hurt her. Slowly. And painfully. Her death will be so brutal, so vile, it will serve as a warning for anyone who dares to touch my wife. Once I'm through, there will be nothing left for my

hounds."

A tremor went through his body. I'd been wrong. Wrath's reaction wasn't mild at all. He was desperately trying to keep himself under control for *my* benefit. I thought of what I'd learned tonight, about how Wrath reacted once the curse began. How he'd nearly killed his brothers in his mad search for me. All he'd found was some blood and torn-out hair. Of course he would have thought his brothers had schemed. A curse would have been the last thing on his mind.

I couldn't help but wonder if there hadn't been any strife between the princes before then. As much as they fought and tried to outmaneuver one another now, there still seemed to be some familial affection. Some loyalty. Maybe one day those wounds could heal, too.

I nestled against my prince, laying my head on his chest. His heart beat like a war drum. Mine marched along to the same haunted rhythm.

If Wrath decided my sister was a true threat to me, he would not hesitate to remove her. I had little doubt that, even as an immortal goddess, he would succeed.

As terrible as things seemed with Vittoria, I was still clutching at hope that there was *some* redeemable part in her. Some way for me to reach what had once been warm and kind when we were mortals. I wanted to believe that Vittoria's goals of breaking my spell-lock and granting me my full power were solely because she wanted what was best for me, but I worried it had more to do with her current plan.

If she wanted a powerful ally and hadn't gotten one with the demon princes, maybe she wanted to unlock my power for her gain. And if Wrath was correct—if there was a chance I might not survive the removal of my heart—I understood why Vittoria's insistence would push him to remove her as a threat. He'd had someone take me against my will before.

I was still fighting my way back to my true self. If our roles were reversed, I would destroy anyone who threatened our happiness, too. I would murder without regret or remorse. Just as I'd done to that Umbra demon. But this was my twin, and it wasn't so simple or black and white.

"I can sense your emotions," he spoke quietly, "but can't read your thoughts."

"I'm thinking about my sister. Vittoria is…" I sighed and glanced up at him. "She's no longer human. I'd like to believe I'd retain my morals, but I'm not sure that's possible. Especially now. Our House was *Vengeance*. It seems to fuel us both. Even before I knew what we were, my initial response to Vittoria's 'death' was simple: revenge. Deep down I know that my sister is hurt and that this is the sole way for her to express it."

Wrath regarded me closely, a deep crease forming in his brow. “Everyone has choices they make. Your sister is using her immortality as an excuse to do unforgivable things. She could alter her path, forge a new one easily. She doesn’t *want* to. And therein lies the issue. She is a monster by choice, not birth.” He bared his teeth in a smile that promised untamed violence. “As we all are. But she’s not the only one who can discard moral code to accomplish a task.”

I held his gaze for a few beats. Nothing but pure determination and icy promise shone out of his eyes. Once he set his mind to it, he’d move the entire underworld to accomplish his goals. Vittoria was very close to becoming his number one task to eliminate. Nothing I could do or say would dissuade him. I knew that for certain because that would be the path I’d take. And no one would stop me. We truly were a match made in Hell.

“Regardless of the methods used to accomplish it, I learned a great many things this evening.” I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. “I don’t believe Vesta is dead. It’s the one question my sister refuses to answer—she goes out of her way to avoid it, actually. If she were guilty, I don’t see why she’d have any trouble rubbing it in Greed’s face. She hates demons, princes of Hell especially. If she truly wishes to start a war, why not admit such a large triumph as slaying someone as important as one of their commanders? Especially if Vesta was as special as Greed claimed. Vittoria hasn’t been shy in boasting about any of her other conquests. Why maintain silence now?”

Wrath exhaled. “I also questioned why Vesta had sought out Pride. He’s hiding something, but I don’t believe it has anything to do with her potential disappearance.”

“What do you believe, then?” I rolled onto my side again, facing him.

“I think he’d been after information and thought he was using Vesta.” His mouth almost lifted in a smile. “Once he realized he’d been outmaneuvered, I think his pride took another hit. Which was why he seemed surprised and annoyed. He thought he’d been the hunter, and he discovered he’d fallen into another trap. He’s been overly sensitive about that sort of thing since your sister trampled all over his carefully crafted image.”

“Did he care for her?”

“Your sister?” Wrath’s attention slid over me as I nodded. “I’m not sure. But he certainly puts an enormous amount of effort into seeing her destroyed. Though that could simply be because he hates himself for letting his pride get in the way of telling his wife the truth.”

“Which was?”

“As far as I know, Pride and Vittoria never did more than kiss. He had his reputation of a debauched prince to uphold, which was why

he'd allowed everyone to think he was bedding her."

"You're certain he never bedded Vittoria?"

Wrath considered my question carefully. "I don't think anyone except Pride and Vittoria know the full truth. He's certainly not shared any details from that night."

And if Vittoria had grown feelings for him and they were unrequited, that certainly could have added fuel to her current "destroy demons and witches" mission. I mulled over another theory. "Do you think Greed sent himself the skull?"

"I wouldn't rule it out as a possibility. If he is convinced your sister is to blame, it would give him a clear motive to attempt to create evidence to prove his theory."

It was precisely what I'd been thinking, too. "Without having complete access to Greed's lands, there isn't any way for us to prove where the skull originated from, correct?" My prince shook his head. I turned over a few more thoughts. "The Duke of Devon mentioned that Vesta's family wasn't from here…"

"Are you considering the blood left at the scene?"

I nodded. "We obviously don't know the circumstances that brought Vesta here, but we know that she'd been inquiring about Pride's portal and the blood scenting. If her family was from somewhere outside of Greed's domain, even outside of the Seven Circles, perhaps she used the portal to return home. With the mixture of blood we found, perhaps she even sneaked some other type of demon here to help her?"

And if that were true, then perhaps she hadn't been the victim at all, but the actual murderer. If she was as unhappy in Greed's court as the duke had claimed, perhaps she had killed someone who stood in her way, leaving the mutilated body behind before making a great escape?

"It's certainly an area to look into and either rule out or prove correct." Wrath kissed my forehead, then got out of bed and pulled on a pair of pressed trousers. Something outside caught his attention, and he quietly swore as he strode onto the balcony.

Whatever exhaustion I'd felt vanished. I pushed the covers back and snagged a robe before joining him, stopping dead in my tracks. Glittering red stars were scattered across the sky, red as a blood-drenched omen. While we stood there silently watching them, they slowly formed a shape.

An anatomical heart, struck through the center with a dagger that had a skull at the top of its hilt. Blood dripped from the tip of the blade, or at least it appeared that way as crimson stars winked and spilled down the now pulsing symbol. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.* It was beating, the pulse waves slowly raising the hair along my arms as

they traveled across the realm.

It was a celestial heart. And it was clearly not a naturally occurring constellation.

"What is that?" I asked, my voice hushed.

"The immortal heart." Wrath's expression turned grim. The stars continued to pulse from their position in the sky, the red appearing like a gash in the universe. My own heart sped up. "It's the symbol of the vampire court."

Wrath dropped his attention to the courtyard below, scanning the moonlit grounds. I followed the path his attention traveled, looking for any sign of movement. A fresh blanket of snow had fallen, the crimson stars reflecting off it like drops of blood on the ground. The red splatters made it seem like a battle had already raged and soldiers had fallen.

I rubbed my arms. The night was quiet, but in no way was it peaceful. It felt like the shadows were watching, waiting. Trouble was near.

"An emissary will arrive soon."

From the tone of Wrath's voice and the way he kept surveying the castle grounds, it was not going to be a welcome visit.

In the weeks I'd been staying at House Wrath, I'd seen many impressive chambers—the libraries, guest suites, the training room, the garden, the Crescent Shallows, the dining hall, the circular tower where Celestia had brewed her potions and tonics, my bedroom suite and Wrath's, among many other formal and informal rooms, terraces, and balconies—but I'd never stepped into Wrath's throne room. It was a study of ferocious, gothic elegance.

Part of me wanted to drop to my knees, confess my sins like a devotee, or better yet, claim my favorite sin in front of the court forever. Though an audience would have to wait, the cathedral-like room with vaulted ceilings was empty for the moment, save for me and Wrath.

"It's stunning," I said, voice echoing lightly. We stood just inside the carved double doors, looking at the place where the devil ruled his kingdom. It suited Wrath. It was refined yet still contained an edge of wickedness. I waited for a spark of memory, but none came.

Black marble floors with pale gold veining, soaring arched ceilings with matching columns in a deep gray stone, and massive chandeliers with ebony gemstones glinted in the candlelight. Muted tones in floral designs were featured in stained glass windows. Which were placed at

least twenty feet off the ground on either side of the room, allowing light to trickle in and break up the darkness. Torches set into serpent sconces were evenly spaced along the lower walls, the fire crackling as if to remind those who entered here that they were in the underworld.

Blasphemous though it may be, it reminded me of a church. Except in this house of worship, the demon of war was the only "heavenly" being who was prayed to.

Gleaming gold weapons decorated the walls, similar to Wrath's training room. Shields, coats of armor, swords and daggers. Bows and arrows and curved blades that made me shiver from their wickedness. At the very back of the room, the widest arched window sat proudly above the throne. Taking up almost the entire wall, the stained glass design featured an unmistakable pair of outstretched black wings. I swallowed hard, realizing they must symbolize the wings that were stolen from Wrath. It must be torturous to have them memorialized like that.

I dropped my attention back to the first level. Just below the enormous window with black wings was a roaring fireplace. I'd never seen one quite so large—like the window, it took up almost the entire wall. A deep burgundy runner ran the length of the room, ending at the base of an ebony dais. The opaque gemstone looked like frozen smoke, forbidding yet beautiful. It was similar to, if not the very same, stone that I'd seen when we first entered this realm.

Atop the dais were two matching thrones. As the king of the underworld, I'd imagined his seat would be larger. Champagne bronze serpents curved around black leather, looking very much like the tattoo Wrath had inked onto his right arm. My heart skipped a beat when I spied vines with thorns that were elegantly twined around the serpent's bodies.

Wrath slanted a look in my direction, his mouth curving in a hint of a smile despite the circumstances that brought us to this chamber so late at night. "You're surprised."

"You really mean for me to be queen. Not just your consort."

He faced me fully, and I was struck by the power of his presence. The magnificence of his magic and the regal way he carried himself. With his ruby-tipped crown, flashing gold eyes, and his black suit tailored expertly to his frame, he was the dark king of many dreams and fantasies. Mine included. The devil grinned like he knew it, too. "You are my match in every way. Anything that's mine belongs to you. Never forget that."

The earnest way he said it, the way he reached for my hands and gripped them in his, it felt as if he were communicating so much more. I leaned toward him. "I—"

The double doors behind us burst open. Several demon maids

rushed in, holding giant urns of black calla lilies and deep burgundy ranunculus. The soft, chiffonlike petals were some of my favorites. The maids rushed to the dais and artfully placed the urns, allowing the trumpet-shaped blossoms of the calla lilies and the burgundy ranunculus to cascade down the steps. Several more plants were brought in, though I couldn't immediately place the small red berries of one.

"Oleander is an interesting choice, especially if you're sending a message," I said, then nodded toward the plant I hadn't identified yet. "But what are those? I assume they're also poisonous or lethal in some way."

"*Abrus precatorius*." Wrath's tone hinted at amusement. "Rosary Pea. Vampires hate them. Not simply for their pious names, but because they can actually kill them. Some mortals figured it out, which is why you'll often find them beaded onto rosaries. Though the jeweler must be extremely careful—one prick of the berry can cause death."

"I thought vampires could only be killed with a stake?"

"A stake through the heart is lethal for most creatures, current company excluded." Wrath gave me a sardonic look, knowing full well I was intimately aware a blade in the chest wouldn't harm him. "Garlic is a nuisance, holy water does nothing from what I've gathered, but these berries?" He plucked one from a passing servant and pinched it between his thumb and forefinger. "These are one of the vampire's most closely guarded secrets."

"Your majesty!"

I turned at the familiar voice, pleased to see my friend Fauna hurrying into the throne room, looking resplendent in a deep copper gown with jewels sewn across the bodice. It felt like ages since I'd last seen her, though it had been only a couple of days.

Fauna had been my first friend in Wrath's court, and while others seemed content to gossip about my arrival, she'd done her best to make me feel welcome. I don't know how I would have gotten through those first few weeks without her friendship.

"Lady Emilia." She offered a polite curtsy to me and dipped low for Wrath. "I've secured the necklace."

She winked at me as she handed Wrath a rather large jewelry box. He lifted the lid to glance inside before closing it again. "Did you get something for yourself?"

"Yes, your majesty." Fauna brushed her curly jet-black hair aside, showing off a choker that featured little red berries. The color looked lovely against her warm brown skin. "I offered one to Anir, but he declined." Her sepia eyes twinkled. "But he did accept the necktie beaded with them. He's dressing now and should arrive shortly."

Wrath jerked his head in approval. “Make sure he looks like a courtier.”

“Of course.” Fauna curtsied again, then rushed from the room, her copper skirts swishing across the marble like whispering waves on the shore.

I nodded at the box. “May I see it?”

Wrath popped the lid open and lifted the necklace.

“Oh.” My breath caught from its beauty. And its true purpose. This was no simple adornment. It was a weapon. Strands of Rosary Pea berries alternated with rubies. The gemstones the deep red of blood. It was meant to entice. To draw the eye. And then to warn. The vampire emissary could look but not touch. Unless he wished to die. “Subtlety isn’t your strong suit.”

“Subtlety is for cowards, my lady.”

Wrath motioned for me to turn around, and he quickly fastened the jewelry around my neck. I faced him again, running my hands over the exquisite statement piece. The demon prince followed the path my hands traveled with his gaze, then continued lower as if he were seeing me for the first time and drinking in the full sight. A carnal look crossed his features. So primal and intense, I was tempted to see what sort of trouble we could get into on the throne.

“Do you like it?” I asked, knowing he more than liked it. I could almost see him calculating whether we had time to make my newest fantasy come true as he looked me over again.

My rose-gold gown hugged my curves, the color so pale and soft someone might forget the terrible magic sizzling under my skin. Might be lured in by the pale pink charred roses covering the top portion of my bodice that plunged a bit too low, might mistake the pale vines with thorns that accentuated my hips before fading into the fuller tulle skirts for pretty adornments, and not understand the warning they were. My gown was my magic in wearable form. I quite loved it.

Wrath looked like he wanted to shred if off and show his appreciation for it in a purely animalistic way. Thoughts of him sliding my skirts up to bury himself deep inside had my cheeks going rosy. Not in embarrassment, but want. I needed a fan. Or an ice bath.

“This gown might be one of the hexed objects we haven’t located yet.” His mouth kicked up at the edges. “It’s certainly got me spellbound. Though I think it’s just you, my lady.”

I glanced at my dress, fighting a grin. I adored when Wrath flirted with me. It was a welcome distraction, a bit of light to balance the dark.

A sharp knock drew our attention. Any hint of sensuality or lightheartedness vanished from Wrath’s face. In its place was the hard, unforgiving mask of the strongest prince of Hell. Here was the demon

whose power was so overwhelming it altered the entire realm. “Enter.”

An older demon hurried in and bowed respectfully low. He wore a suit that reminded me of butlers in my favorite romance novels. “The emissary’s party just left the stables, your majesty.”

“Alert Anir and the others. I want them here now.” Wrath held his arm out to me, so formal and full of manners. “Come, my lady. Let’s prepare ourselves for our guests.”

“Unwelcome though they may be.”

“Indeed.” Wrath’s grin was wolfish.

I placed my hand in the crook of his arm, and we made our way to the thrones. Even feeling safe in our own House of Sin, nerves still had my pulse pounding. An unfortunate thing considering who we were about to entertain.

Wrath helped me up the stairs, then brought his lips to the shell of my ear, his warm breath causing a delightful shiver to dance along my spine. “Breathe. Or the emissary will walk in on me doing everything in my power to get your heart pounding for more pleasant reasons.”

To follow his seductive statement with action, he kissed the pulse point at my throat, his tongue flicking over it lightly as he scraped his teeth against my skin. His hands… those cursed, incredible things, drifted along the swell of my breasts, down my silhouette until he playfully squeezed my bottom, promising to do exactly what he’d said.

I abruptly sat on my throne, earning a deep chuckle from Wrath. I was well and truly distracted as I fought the temptation to have him kneel before me, his head between my thighs, as the vampire entered our domain and the demon’s tongue entered me.

Wrath’s eyes flared—he’d sensed my arousal and likely felt the emotions I was struggling with. Goddess curse him for being so impossible to resist; this was *not* the time to be thinking of a tryst. Or submitting to desire.

I gave him a slight shake of my head. “Behave. The emissary will arrive soon.”

“I have no idea what you mean, my lady.” The look he gave me was a mixture of pure male smugness and feigned innocence. “I’m simply admiring my fierce wife.”

He sat on his throne and once again adopted that icy demeanor. I wouldn’t wish to be on the receiving end of that look. It promised unending cruelty. Anir and Fauna entered the chamber, followed by several other demons I didn’t recognize, all wearing their finery.

Most demons—both male and female—often stood with confidence, but something about the way these courtiers moved made me think they weren’t simply lords and ladies of House Wrath. I’d wager anything these were soldiers.

I gave my husband a sideways look. He was prepared to fight. I was unsure if it was simply a precaution or if it was an offensive move. There hadn't been much time for us to get ready, and he'd left the bedchamber to meet with Anir and his top soldiers before I'd finished getting dressed. I had no clue what his scheme was, but I was certain he had one.

Wrath caught my eye and flashed a quick, devious grin. "Always have an arrow nocked and ready to fire if you invite an enemy in."

"Perhaps I can help with the fire portion." I summoned burning flowers and allowed them to hover over the dais. The heat from the fire quickly turned sweltering.

A few of the soldiers tensed but held their ground. Unbidden, I recalled what Fauna said when I'd first met her—about how some soldiers had laughed when one high-ranking officer wished to remove my still-beating heart and serve it to them. My fury slowly burned away other emotions as I turned my attention on the demons in the room. It was not a conscious choice to submit to my wrath, but I didn't fight it immediately, either. Were any of those demons who wished to harm me present now?

One thought and I could destroy them all. Send them screaming as their flesh melted from their bones. I could exact vengeance on them all and—

A soft, feminine laugh broke the spell. I let my magic go and blinked at our guests. I hadn't heard them announced, and I struggled to catch my breath without being obvious.

"Blade." Wrath seemed unimpressed as he addressed the emissary, purchasing me precious seconds to regain my senses. I wished I could lean over and kiss him, but I settled my attention on the two figures approaching us, adopting a look of cool boredom I'd seen Envy use.

Blade, a striking vampire—with chiseled features and tousled chestnut hair—quickly raked his gaze over me, pausing on the necklace with lethal berries, before turning his attention on Wrath, his expression impossible to decipher. His eyes were a deep crimson bordering on black framed with a thick fringe of lashes. He looked like trouble. But more in a defiant rebel way, not the subtle danger Wrath possessed when he chose to become someone's problem.

I barely spared Blade a second glance as I took in his companion, the female who'd laughed. She looked like a warrior queen, though I didn't see any weapons strapped to her. Which meant *she* was a weapon more deadly than any steel blade she could carry.

Dark hair cascaded down her back, her ebony gown looking more like leather armor than the high fashion popular in the demon courts. It was her eyes, though, that made my skin crawl. I'd seen them before. In a nightmare. They were star-flecked and fathomless.

Ancient and filled with hate. And they were trained on me as she neared the dais with the vampire.

Wrath leaned forward, his voice dropping to a growl. “Sursea.”

The woman hadn’t yet taken her attention from me, her mouth twitching in what appeared to be dark amusement. I found myself wanting to throttle the look from her face.

“Isn’t this intriguing.” Her tone indicated she meant anything *but* intriguing. She took another step toward us, her gaze narrowing. “Do you know who I am?”

She wasn’t a vampire. Nor was she a demon. There wasn’t anything mortal about her, either, and yet I didn’t think she was a goddess. I had a terrible suspicion, and the tense way Wrath sat, as if he were about to spring out of his throne and strangle her, confirmed my fears.

“You’re the First Witch,” I said. “La Prima Strega.”

FIFTEEN

The First Witch, Sursea, eyed me the way predators survey potential threats or prey.

Instinct took over, and I bared my teeth, the vicious smile indicating I might not be fully restored to my former glory, but I was not prey, either. I stared the witch down, my fury growing the longer I held her hateful gaze. *She'd* taken Wrath from me. She'd used me and Vittoria in her twisted game. And I would make her pay in blood and tears for her sins. Not now, but one day soon my face would be the one in her nightmares.

Her attention flicked to Wrath, her expression turning mocking. "Six years and six months have certainly flown by, haven't they, your majesty? Time may move differently here, but it still moves. How many days was it, again? I seem to have forgotten."

Wrath's gaze shot to mine for a brief flash before turning back to our enemy, but it was enough to amuse the witch once more. Her laughter filled the quiet chamber again. Only this time it sounded as if she knew a secret. One she shared with my husband.

And I detonated.

"Bow down to the king." My voice was cold. Imperious. I felt Wrath's attention shift to me, felt the whole room glance in my direction, but I did not break my stare with the witch. She must have sensed the fire burning in my soul. Sursea arched a brow but slowly went to her knees, the leather of her gown creaking in the silence.

I turned my focus to the vampire, who drew back almost imperceptibly. I had little doubt my eyes were now rose-gold and burning with my barely leashed power. If he hadn't cared who or what I was before, he did now.

"Do not make me repeat myself. Bow or you'll burn." I summoned

a fiery rose and sent it hovering above Blade.

He clenched his teeth but went to his knees, inclining his head in Wrath's direction. "Your majesty."

I stared at their prone forms, not releasing them from their positions of forced acquiescence. Wrath didn't utter a word, sensing my emotions and giving me the time I needed to regain control. Or maybe he was simply pleased and wanted to see what I'd do next; discover how else our sins aligned in unholy matrimony. He'd said he wanted an equal. Wrath might command ice, but I was all fire. And the First Witch really shouldn't have stoked my fury. Had it been only Blade speaking for the vampires, I doubted I'd have reacted the way I did.

It was Sursea's presence, her foul demeanor, the implication that she had a secret my husband knew, along with her sneer at Wrath, that drove me mad with rage. For hurting him, I wanted to hurt her tenfold. It was irrational. Absolute. A consuming need for pure vengeance. I suddenly understood my sister all too well. I wanted our enemies to suffer. For every year, every month, day, hour, and *second* of pain they inflicted on my loved ones, I wanted to return the favor until they begged for mercy or death. And then I'd deny them that, too.

Twisted though it may be, that was the power of love. It could usher in warmth and light, and it could also turn a single ember into a raging inferno, destroying those who threatened it. Love might be the worst sin of them all, with its two sides.

Or perhaps that was simply the way of House Vengeance.

Torches around the chamber flared higher, the flames flickering wildly in a phantom breeze. I glanced around the mostly empty court, at the soldiers in their finery, Anir and Fauna among them. Respect, not fear, flared in each of their eyes. I might have scared them a little before, but they'd expect the princess of House Wrath to inspire some fear just as their prince did. That I was now using that power on our enemies… I inclined my head in their direction, acknowledging them. My attention returned to the unwanted guests still groveling at our feet.

That ancient, terrible power in my core stirred. The First Witch tensed. Her curse had locked it away, and the magic keeping it confined was deteriorating. One way or another, my spell-lock would break. And then that monster would be free. Sursea sensed that. She had to.

It was that thought, that promise to let my beast go wild one day, that soothed me. Still, it took every ounce of restraint I could muster to not unleash my magic now and watch them burn.

Tendrils of smoke curled into the air, and the acrid scent of

leather burning wafted over to where we sat. The First Witch flinched but didn't move to put out the glowing ember in her skirts. Wrath ran a finger along the top of my hand, his caress a cool balm to my fury. I exhaled slowly, quietly. And I drew my magic back to its source. I waited another beat to be certain I'd found my center. One wrong move and I'd become the monster I was feared to be.

"Rise." My expression was now as tightly guarded as my emotions.

Wrath leaned back in his throne, a cruel tilt to his lips. Here sat an amused devil, delighting in his equally wicked queen. He regarded the vampire coolly, ignoring the witch as if she weren't standing there at all. "Why are you here?"

"To discuss a potential alliance between us."

"Strange timing for your prince. He hasn't bothered with the northern regions for centuries."

"Not quite so odd. After a recent visit from the goddess of death and her unique demon-werewolf companion, it made my prince consider the potential for having such unusual allies." To his credit, Blade held my husband's intense stare.

My eyes narrowed. Aside from her claim of wanting to spark unease and potentially start a war between supernaturals, Vittoria was up to something. Perhaps the companion Blade mentioned was simply Domenico somehow throwing off his scent, but another theory rose in my mind, and I chanced following it. "Was the demon-werewolf's name Vesta?"

"No. Marcella." Blade's attention never left Wrath's as he answered. "She hailed from the Shifting Isles."

"You're certain she wasn't from here?" I asked.

"She didn't say anything else. And we were mostly concerned with the goddess."

Suspicion coiled around me, but Blade clearly had no other information on my sister's companion. At least nothing he was willing to share if we refused an alliance.

Given the blood left at the murder scene, it made sense for Vesta to be genetically unique. Which might be why Greed coveted her. And was the first aspect I'd wondered about when both demon and werewolf blood had been found. This information made me now question if Vesta's interest in the portal on Pride's land had something to do with a potential inability for her to travel to the Shadow Realm. If my theory was correct and she was genetically unique, perhaps her demon side made that impossible. Much like the new wolf Antonio had mentioned.

While Blade and Wrath silently battled, I studied the vampire more closely.

Strong brows framed those piercing crimson eyes, his lashes thick

enough to make anyone envious. His hair was a bit too long to be fully tamed and looked like he'd carelessly combed it before arriving here. Full lips curved in a half smirk as if he'd just recalled a particularly humorous joke he hadn't bothered to share.

Perhaps the amusement was due to the cunning glint in his eyes—the one that hinted that plenty of victims had fallen for that roguish charm.

His black suit jacket was fitted to his well-proportioned frame, and his white linen shirt and matching cravat were a surprise. Given his appetite for blood, I would have imagined he'd choose to wear all black. Dark trousers hugged muscular legs and were tucked fashionably into freshly buffed riding boots. There was an air about him that said he could dedicate himself to being either your truest protector or your worst enemy based on a whim.

Even standing there, spine straight under the weight of Wrath's scrutiny, he gave the impression that his jacket was seconds away from being discarded. His collar and cravat seemed to chafe, not because they were uncomfortable or lacking finery, but because the vampire did not appear to want to play pretend. He looked ready to shed all civility and embrace the cruel being he was underneath the refinement. Or perhaps he was simply thirsty and wished for a drink after his travels. If he was the emissary, I wondered what the less diplomatic vampires were like.

Wrath didn't move, but there was no mistaking the threat *he* posed while he let the silence stretch uncomfortably. My husband, unlike my impression of Blade, did not act on whims. He was cold calculation and brutal efficiency. Once he decided to make a move, others could either retreat or die. If they grew angry in the process, all the better. Their emotions would feed his sin.

My prince finally allowed his focus to briefly drift over to the witch before he responded to the vampire's earlier proclamation. "You thought bringing her was the best path to peace?"

"I—"

The demon prince raised a hand. With the way Blade cut his answer off, you'd think Wrath had held up a dagger. "Or was she merely a secondary distraction?"

Blade hesitated for less than a beat, but it was enough to notice that Wrath had caught him off guard. "We thought—"

"You thought to come here, to my House, under the false pretense of peace so you could take what you'd been after all along." Wrath cocked his head. "Are you truly that dumb? Or desperate? You know who I am. What I'm capable of. So perhaps it's arrogance and stupidity." My husband stood, his displeasure forcing the air to frost. Ice coated the stairs on the dais. "And you dared to stand here, lying

to my face, and believed you'd get away with it."

Sursea stepped forward, reaching for something she'd hidden up her sleeve. A weapon, no doubt. She seethed as she yanked a blade free. "Your wife will—"

Wrath barely glanced in her direction as he froze her in place just as he'd done to the werewolves who'd attacked us.

It was one thing to see a wolf frozen solid, and another thing entirely to see a person encased in a thick block of ice. She'd been caught midscream, her expression twisted in pain or fury. We weren't lucky enough for her to be dead—she was immortal, according to Nonna's stories—but at least she would be tamed for a while, frozen in misery.

I didn't feel sorry for Sursea in the least. She never should have attempted to threaten me. Least of all after she'd been the one to curse Wrath and take us from each other in the first place.

As if he'd been thinking the same thing, remembering the night I'd been stolen by the curse, the temperature plummeted again, the room taking on a blue hue as if the walls themselves were chilled to the bone. All the torches and oversized fireplace made sense now, the air was so frigid, so brutal, that death lurked like a dog scenting scraps outside a butcher's shop. The fires gave a slight bit of respite from an otherwise unforgiving atmosphere.

Wrath had been well and truly pushed beyond his sin.

And the vampire recognized that. He held his hands up in surrender. "I don't want war."

"Considering my elite forces just took out several vampires camped along the outskirts of my circle, and a few within castle grounds, I think otherwise."

I kept my expression neutral, not wanting to let my surprise show. Logically, I understood there had been no time for Wrath to share what he'd learned, but I wished he'd mentioned *something* before they arrived.

Not hindered by the ice that now coated the floor, Wrath slowly descended the steps, the apex predator on the prowl. "Is there anything you'd like to confess? Now is the time."

Calculation flickered in Blade's otherwise emotionless eyes. "I brought protection. Everyone knows traveling across the realm is dangerous. Lesser demons, errant souls."

The Prince of Wrath now stood within arm's reach of the vampire. Tension filled the throne room, and I fought the urge to stand beside my husband. This was his battle, his move.

The demon soldiers seemed to feel the same compulsion—perhaps it was the sin they all aligned with. Their need to unleash their anger and pummel anyone brazen enough to lie to their king. Given the way

Wrath cocked his head, I imagined that was exactly what Blade had done.

Stupid. It was a move he'd no doubt regret. Though I was hardly sorry for him, either.

"You were accompanied by one of the most vicious creatures in the land. How many vampires did you truly need to protect you?" His gaze flicked to the frozen witch. "Anir?"

Wrath's second-in-command allowed a slow, nasty smile to spread across his face at his king's summons. The demon nodded, indicating it was time to reveal whatever they'd previously discussed. As a former fighter, Anir had likely been waiting for this moment, hoping it would come to this. The human bowed, then left the chamber, the soles of his fine boots slapping against the marble. My husband turned his attention back to the vampire.

"Last chance, Blade. Tell me the true purpose of your visit and you'll walk away unscathed. Lie and you'll suffer for it."

Defiance fell over the vampire like a royal mantle. "I told you. I'm here to form an alliance with you for my prince. Unlike the goddess of death, we do not want to tear this realm apart."

"Very well."

Wrath's tone was deceptively calm, crisp. No more threatening than a few snowflakes falling lazily from the sky on an otherwise cloudless day. I saw the truth of what it meant and fought a shudder. It was not the soothing sort of calm that indicated peace or serenity; it was the kind of charged tranquility that made the hair on my arms stand on end. Wrath's cool demeanor was meant to lure his adversary into a false sense of security as the true threat approached.

We were in the eye of the storm now, teetering on the precipice of what promised to be the worst of what was to come. And the vampire had no idea he'd started an avalanche that would soon bury him.

A few moments later, the double doors burst open, and Anir strode in ahead of a chained prisoner. Guards flanked the young blonde woman, swords at the ready.

My features remained impassive as they approached the dais, but I watched Blade out of the corner of my eye. He'd flinched the second he saw the girl. Wrath caught the action, too; he allowed the barest hint of a smile to curve his lips.

"The prisoner, your majesty." Anir stepped to the side and allowed the chained woman to approach. Before she smiled wide enough to show fangs, her red eyes gave her away as a vampire. Despite the rough spun dress she wore, the haughty tilt of her chin indicated a high standing member in their court. She ignored Blade and moved her narrowed gaze to me. Something like alarm crossed her features before she'd adopted that indolent expression again.

Wrath did not bother with introductions or pleasantries. “This was one of the vampires my forces found on the grounds of House Wrath. Are you certain there isn’t anything you’d like to tell me now, Blade?” The vampire clenched his teeth together, slowly shaking his head. Wrath looked at the prisoner with deadly fire in his eyes. “Put the charm on.”

Anir held up a strange necklace. A teardrop ruby the size of a robin’s egg hung from a gold chain that looked to be woven with some organic material. An uncomfortable feeling had me sitting back, not wanting to get near whatever magic sparked from the charm.

“No.” The woman was either fearless or stupid. Or perhaps she knew a worse fate awaited her at home if she betrayed her prince.

Blade remained stoic as the guards took hold of her, forcing her to her knees. Anir looped the necklace over her head and quickly stepped back. A shimmering, almost clear veil appeared, draping over her entire body. It melted into her skin, and I watched in horror as her hair changed from golden wheat to dark brown. Her pale skin shifted to bronze, and her features slowly took on a familiar heart-shaped form. I stood, shaking my head. “How is that possible?”

The vampire looked up at me, her eyes flashing from warm brown to rose-gold. The face that stared back at me was my own. A perfect replica.

Goose bumps rose over my body. It was like looking in a mirror. Not in the familiar or comforting way of being a twin, but an invasive foreign way that made me feel vulnerable. Every detail, from my newest *SEMPER TVVS* marriage tattoo that Wrath shared to our bond tattoo, was also on the vampire.

I pressed a hand to my chest, and she mimicked the movement. It was eerie, having someone mime your actions less than a second after you’d moved. My gaze cut to the charm, and I suddenly knew what the organic material was: my hair.

Somehow, some way, she’d gotten a lock and had performed dark magic. It was something Nonna Maria always warned us about and why she’d insisted we burn our nail and hair clippings. I’d thought she was overly cautious and superstitious. And yet she’d been correct. An enemy *had* used them against me. If Nonna feared us, then why protect us?

I didn’t have time to sort out any theories. Wrath glanced to me, his expression inscrutable. “Ask her what her mission was.”

Understanding what he truly meant, I inclined my head. I whispered the Latin that would force the truth from her. She had just enough time to shoot Blade a worried look—still wearing my face—before the spell lashed out and gripped her. “Why were you sent here?”

Unlike my twin, her will wasn't nearly as strong; she broke easily. "To seduce the king."

Fury fueled my magic, and I speared into her mind, demanding more truth. "For what purpose?"

A tear rolled down her cheek. *My* cheek. "To distract him."

"From what?" My voice was low, nightmarish with power. "Tell me details of your mission."

She swallowed hard, the words burning in her throat to be set free. "To distract him while Sursea incapacitated you and took you to the vampire court."

"WHY?" I was shaking with fury now. They'd dared to come here, to separate us again.

"I don't know! I was only told to entertain the king until you'd been secured."

In a move so swift that no mortal could ever hope to achieve, Wrath was suddenly behind the vampire who wore my face. His expression was the coldest I'd ever seen.

Here was justice in its purest form. It was not kind or merciful. Good or evil. It was just, harsh. Like nature. Wrath gripped her head and twisted, the sickening pop indicating she would not live to cast another illusion. Wrath wasn't done yet. Instead of letting her body drop to the floor, he twisted harder, tearing her head clean from her shoulders with his bare hands.

I swallowed hard as my face slowly melted back into her own. There was no blood, given that she was already dead. No gore. But the sudden end… the finality of her true death… caused me to shudder. Blade stared coldly at the scene, though I noticed one hand had curled at his side.

Wrath said he had the opportunity to leave this circle unscathed. And while the vampire would be set free, he certainly wasn't leaving without suffering a loss. It just hadn't come in the form he'd expected. Fool that he was to attempt to trick the devil.

My husband handed the severed head to Blade. "Take this back to your prince. If he ever attempts to steal my wife using parlor tricks or any other means again, my queen and I will eliminate every last vampire from this realm."

Blade took the head, his jaw clenched tight. "That was his betrothed."

"Then he should have taken more care to protect her from his enemies." Wrath stepped over the body, placing himself closer to the vampire emissary. It was a subtle maneuver that also blocked me from any attempted retribution. "Instead, he sent her here to fuck me while you used the witch to kidnap my wife. Did you truly think that illusion would work? That I would be so easily manipulated by subpar

magic? That I would for one second mistake her for my wife?" The demon leaned in. "You saw a small *taste* of what my queen is capable of. If I don't kill you first, she will. Now get the fuck out of my circle. And don't come back unless you mean to start a war."

SIXTEEN

"I didn't want to think Vittoria was serious about the vampires," I said as Wrath entered the kitchen on silent feet. Daybreak was fast approaching, but I couldn't sleep. "Or that they would use her information to scheme up another problem on their own."

I went back to chopping herbs while he headed for the icebox. Fragrant parsley and dill filled the air, the scent fresh and welcome after the last few horrendous hours.

My sister and Nonna Maria in the Shadow Realm. The vampires.

It had been another emotionally taxing night, and no matter how exhausted my body was, sleeping felt like an impossible task. Too many thoughts and worries were racing through my mind. Each time I thought I knew where to start detangling this mess, a new thread knotted itself together. There was still the murder or fabrication of Vesta's murder to figure out, the rest of my curse to break, and our marriage ceremony to perform to seal our vows.

A ceremony Wrath hadn't mentioned or pushed for, even after the vampires had tried to wrench us apart. If we completed the bond, I imagined any future kidnapping attempts would end. Something Wrath had undoubtedly considered, and yet no arrangements were being made. I wanted to believe it was so I could continue investigating Vesta's murder without officially becoming a member of House Wrath, but doubt crept in.

I thought of what my sister had said about Wrath being unable to give me his heart. If his curse was to lose everything he loved and I was still here…

I swallowed hard and chopped the herbs with more vigor than needed. I had to prioritize my goals, and being upset over Wrath ought to be last. What I needed to focus on first was finding proof that

Vesta was alive. Then I could figure out a way to save Vittoria from the blood retribution, and then remove my spell-lock.

"Are you all right?" the demon asked, watching with a quirked brow as my knife attacked the cutting board. "Is this because of the First Witch?"

I lifted a shoulder noncommittally. After Blade was escorted from the castle, Wrath had Sursea taken to an underground chamber that would keep her frozen and I'd sneaked away to the kitchen. I needed to create. To do something familiar and calming, something that reminded me I was more than a spell-locked goddess whose twin was potentially murdering members of rival demon courts or setting them free, whose family might be the true villains of a very complicated, nightmarish fairy tale, whose husband might not truly ever love me freely, and whose list of enemies and complications seemed to grow with each passing day.

I hated to think anything could get worse from here.

"What do you think their prince wanted with me?"

"Drink?"

I jerked my attention to his. At first I thought he'd meant the vampire wished to drink me. Wrath held up a bottle of sparkling demonberry wine, smiling. I nodded, and he poured me a glass before grabbing a bottle of the pale purple liquor he preferred and serving himself a generous amount.

He sipped it, then leaned against the counter, watching me rinse cannellini beans with quiet fascination, intrigued when I started to mash them in a bowl until they were smooth enough to spread. I wasn't sure what I was making yet, either, but I had an idea of what I'd like it to taste like. Hopefully, it would be good.

"To answer your question," he said, "I suspect he wants you for your power, given the tumultuous state of his court. Royal vampires have the ability to place someone under their thrall. All the prince would have to do is give you a bit of his blood, and you'd essentially do anything to please him, hoping for more."

I minced two large cloves of garlic, then zested a lemon before cutting it into quarters to squeeze over the mashed beans. "They could have accepted Vittoria's alliance. Your brother did mention that she'd sought them out, too. She's also fully restored. I'm still only a shadow witch. They knew it would anger you, so it was a rather large, desperate risk. I don't see the value in what they tried to accomplish when they had someone willing to stand beside them."

"Your sister rules over death. They are undead. On a whim, she could decide she no longer wants to play nicely with them and they would cease. Choosing to steal you was the best option. Despite the risk, if they'd succeeded, it would have solved many of their problems.

You're also not in possession of your full power, which would have made you easier for their prince to manipulate. The plan was decent enough. But they didn't plan on one thing."

"Which is?"

"You cannot be replicated."

I gave him a sardonic look. "I have a twin."

"Doesn't matter." Wrath lifted a shoulder. "I always knew you. And always will. Your soul calls to mine. It's a feeling of coming home. Of peace. No magic can duplicate it." For a second, I forgot how to breathe. We held each other's gazes, and after a moment, Wrath's lips curved in a troublesome grin. "Plus, no one manages to look at me with such fury and desire like you do."

"Mmm." I smiled and slightly shook my head. "The truth will out, I see."

When Wrath spoke like that, it was hard to believe he didn't love me.

"How am I still here?" I asked, setting my knife down. "Your curse…"

He took another sip of his drink, then wrapped an arm around me, drawing me to his side. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about that tonight." The prince pressed his lips to my temple in a chaste kiss. "I promise we will. Soon. Just not now."

I studied his features. The strain in his jaw, the fierceness in his eyes. The demon looked like he needed a respite from our nightmarish few hours, so our conversation could wait.

"All right." I gave him a tight smile and focused on the food again. He moved to the other side of the island, giving me plenty of space to work. "What do you think of what Blade said regarding Vittoria's unusual companion?"

"Marcella?"

"Mmh-hmm." I scooped the lemon zest up and sprinkled it over the beans, quickly adding the herbs next. I drizzled olive oil, two tablespoons of warm water, then added salt and fresh ground pepper. Wrath's cooks had red pepper flakes in the pantry, so I added a generous pinch of them, too. I stirred everything until it was well mixed, then topped it off with the remaining fresh herbs, pepper flakes, and a drizzle more of olive oil. "I can't help but wonder if Vesta assumed a new identity or reclaimed her true name. If *she's* the demon-werewolf companion he spoke of."

"It would explain the blood."

"It might also explain why Vesta didn't simply escape to the Shadow Realm. If she's both demon and werewolf, she probably can't travel there alone like the other wolves. Correct?"

"I would imagine so. I can travel there because I'm the king.

Lesser demons cannot, though. If Vesta is half demon, I think that would certainly hinder her ability to travel there on her own," Wrath said. "Who has been with your sister when you enter the Shadow Realm?"

"Only Domenico."

"The alpha." Wrath removed toast points from the oven and slid them onto a waiting dish. Without needing instruction, he spread the herbed white bean dip over a piece of toast and handed it to me before serving himself one, too. He took a bite and briefly closed his eyes. "This is delicious."

I sampled my own piece and sighed happily. It had been an experiment and turned out exactly as I'd hoped it would. It was creamy and flavorful and felt nurturing after a hellish evening. I adored how simple it was, how each ingredient complemented the other.

I took another bite, allowing my mind to wander with possibilities. "It's good as a dip, but I'd also like to try it with grilled chicken, dressed salad greens, and perhaps roasted red peppers. Or maybe cherry peppers. Make a true meal out of it."

"Mmh."

Wrath sipped his drink, then finished his toast before fixing another, the silence comfortable between us. With each bite, he seemed to relax more, lose some of the tension he'd been carrying since I'd awoken from the Shadow Realm and the vampires arrived.

"I think your theory about Vesta not being dead is correct," he said. "What I haven't quite worked out yet is whether Greed realizes that. I'm inclined to believe that he did fall for the ruse and that's why he might have sent himself the skull. Or, more likely, asked one of his closest guards to provide evidence to condemn your twin. That way he wouldn't lie about the skull."

"So we need to find Vesta or get my sister to confess any role she played in Vesta's escape."

"If your sister did, indeed, assist with her escape, she needs to tell me directly. I can sense if she lies and take the proof to Greed."

Which would then remove the blood retribution he'd been granted and save my twin from any of the other princes. It wasn't going to be easy to get my sister to talk, but I had to try.

Once we'd eaten our fill, we stood quietly with our drinks. Wrath swirled his, staring into his glass, seeming lost in thought. "The cooking is new."

His admission caught me by surprise. I nearly choked on my next sip of wine. "What?"

"Before the spell-lock, you weren't interested in cooking," he said, bringing his attention to mine. "You seem relaxed when you're

creating, peaceful. Your mortal family did a lot wrong, but I feel like murdering them a little less when I see you looking at roasted garlic like it's the most wondrous thing in our universe."

"Aside from you, naturally."

"That goes without saying." Somehow, Wrath had managed to slowly close in on where I stood. My heart thumped with each measured step he took, his focus dropping to my lips with unchecked desire. "How am I looking at *you*, my lady?"

Hunger, raw and untamed, flashed in his face. There was little doubt that *I* was about to be his main course. I set my wineglass aside. My breathing quickening in charged anticipation as he stalked closer; his cunning eyes, not missing the reaction I had to his proximity, twinkled.

"You certainly don't look like you hate me, demon."

"Hatred is the last thing I feel when I look at you."

I wanted him to confess his love. He seemed like he wanted to. I was almost sure he was on the verge of saying those most precious words, when the prince pushed me against the countertop, his mouth crashing down on mine instead.

One hand tangled in my unbound hair, angling my head up to run his tongue along the seam of my lips, and my mouth parted on instinct, granting him access to taste and tease. His other arm hooked around my waist, anchoring me against his hard body. Each stroke of his tongue sent a streak of sensation through me, causing me to arch into him, seeking more.

Wrath possessed my mouth with the confidence of a partner who knew *exactly* how to seduce a lover properly and thoroughly. How to kiss with such passion, such vigor to both steal breath and give it. I swore he could tell how hard my heart was pounding and my knees were wobbling and that I never wanted the feeling to end, because he kissed me harder, demanding my body to give in to the pleasure he was offering, to surrender wholly and completely while he took me to heaven.

"I'm going to devour you right here on the counter, my lady."

Wrath trailed openmouthed kisses along the neckline of my bodice, slowly pulling the material down to expose the top of my chest. His warm tongue darted out, teasing my aching flesh as his other hand slid up and cupped my other breast. He suckled over the material and squeezed, each pull of his mouth causing the heat in my belly to dip lower.

I dragged his mouth back up to mine, wanting to devour *him*. He ground his hips against me, and then the devious prince swallowed my moan, pushing his silken tongue back into my mouth. One hand fell to the hem of my skirts, his fingers curling into the material as he

slowly dragged the hemline up.

"You're so incredibly beautiful, Emilia."

Wrath pulled back, allowing our lips to hover against each other, our breath mingling in a barely there kiss before he sealed his mouth over mine again. This kiss was probing, consuming. It made me crave him terribly. His fingers finally found that pulsing area between my legs, but just as he was about to bring my torment to an end, there was a knock at the door. Wrath withdrew his hand and pressed his forehead to mine, cursing.

"I am going to murder and maim my entire court. This whole fucking realm if someone interrupts us again. I hope you won't mind ruling over a kingdom of nothing."

"Maybe they'll go away," I offered, glancing down at Wrath's trousers. Goddess above, I wanted *that* inside me now.

He grinned and tilted my chin up, running his thumb over my bottom lip until it parted. "Maybe." He kissed me again, long and lingering. Another sharp knock sounded, breaking us apart. Wrath stepped back and glanced up at the ceiling, and I wondered if he hadn't exactly been teasing about murdering his whole court. "I'll get rid of them."

The demon was across the kitchen a beat later and cracked the door. Lust barged in, grinning as he took in my rumpled appearance, then Wrath's impressive bulge. "Really? The kitchens?" He slapped his brother on the back. "You might end up in my House of Sin yet, you lusty delinquent."

Wrath let loose a deep, rumbling sound of annoyance that I found wildly endearing. "Why are you here without an invitation, and why shouldn't I stab you?" he ground out.

"You're cock dumb." Lust found a pear in a large serving bowl and tossed it in the air before rubbing it on his lapel. He checked the buffed fruit over. "*You* asked us to the Pit at dawn. Everyone's there, and the first fight's ready to begin. They're waiting on you."

"The Pit?" I asked, looking between them. "Is it a boxing ring?"

"Legendary and exclusive. It's *the* best fighting ring in the Seven Circles. This bastard hardly lets us come and watch." Lust took a bite of his pear, his charcoal eyes gleaming at my inquisitive look. "Your husband provides his court a way to unleash their sin of choice. While also allowing mortal souls a chance at redemption. Boring as that part is."

"And there's a fight soon?"

Lust nodded. "From dawn until dusk."

The idea of going anywhere for that long after the night we'd had made my knees go weak. Wrath didn't miss a thing. He was by my side again in an instant, brushing his lips over mine. "I'll return as

soon as I can. Get some rest."

Lust snorted and finished his pear. "Judging by *that* look, you'll need it."

Sleep still evaded me after Wrath and Lust left, so I decided to do some research. Until I saw my sister again, little could be done to learn anything else regarding Vesta's disappearance, so I tackled the next biggest item on my list of goals. Breaking my spell-lock.

Thanks to Domenico's snide comment about my mother having more important matters to attend to, I knew she wouldn't be there, but I went to Celestia's tower anyway. If anyone had any texts or notes on spell-locks, it would be the Matron of Curses and Poisons.

There *had* to be a way to remove the spell without sacrificing my heart. I refused to believe having Vittoria rip it out was my only option. If I could break the spell on my own, it would be one less thing to worry over. One less reason for people to try to keep tearing me and Wrath apart.

"Hello? Celestia?" I gently rapped my knuckles against the wooden door, waiting a few beats before trying the handle. It twisted easily, and the door swung open, revealing an empty, darkened chamber. Wane light trickled in from the windows set high in the tower, muted from the overcast skies and latest wintry storm.

I went in and found some candles and lanterns to light. I set them on the table piled with bundles of herbs and baskets of dried botanicals, then glanced around the circular chamber.

It looked like it had the last time I'd visited. There was a skull with arcane symbols etched onto it sitting on the mantel, various glass jars filled with items that tapped the sides, figurines, herbs, spices, dried petals, liquids in a wide array of colors, cauldrons and steaming vials of unknown origins. But the stack of grimoires and books—*those* were what I set about gathering. Once I had a decent pile, I pulled one of the wooden stools out and sat.

My mother, strange as it still was to think of Celestia that way, had meticulous notes on different remedies. I flipped through one grimoire that had sketches of plants along with quantities needed to blend the perfect tonic. Poisons and potions for love, for heartache, for upset stomachs and aching heads, for cursing an enemy with warts or pox or a flesh-eating rash.

I paused to read one; a spell for forgetting.

SPELL TO FORGET

* Beeswax candle, three

* Wooden bowl—made from a sapling in Bloodwood Forest
* River water collected during the new moon, one cup

* Grave dirt, one handful

* Black moonstone, one

* Hawthorn flowers, one pinch

* Lemon balm, one teaspoon dried

* Rosemary, one sprig

* Cloth from the person you wish to forget

Mix lemon balm, rosemary, and hawthorn flowers together with half the river water. Bring to a slow boil and steep. Add remaining river water to the wooden bowl, light the candles, and place black moonstone in the bowl to the north. Sprinkle dirt over stone. Using the cloth of the one you wish to forget, cleanse the stone and repeat:

Earth, to send memories to the grave.
Fire, to burn times three.
Water, to cleanse the emotions enslaved.
I drink this tea and command you to
forever leave me.

Drink tea in one pass then sleep with the stone under your pillow until the next full moon.

Goddess above. For a second, I'd been worried it was a spell

Nonna had used on us, but we'd only collected grave dirt to bless our amulets. We'd never cleansed a stone and slept with it under our pillows. Though I remember teasing my friend Claudia about it once when she'd admitted to doing something similar after her crush rejected her.

That was one of the simpler spells. I flipped page after page of notes that progressively used stronger magic. Celestia had a remedy for any malady or hex.

It was truly astounding what she'd created. I was startled to realize both Vittoria and I had taken after her in some way once we were "mortal"—my sister loved to tinker with perfumes and cocktails, and I loved to create in the kitchen. Putting that unsettling realization aside, I pulled another journal out and flipped through more of the same.

There were no notes on spell-locks. No magic elixirs to cure what troubled me. It had been something I'd hoped to find but hadn't expected to.

If spell-locks were that simple to remove, they wouldn't be very effective. Plus, Wrath knew I had a spell-lock, and he'd likely have had Celestia working on a cure if she hadn't already been trying herself. No matter what Vittoria had said about our mother being distracted by other whims, I didn't think she'd sit back and allow witches to potentially kill her daughters without attempting to save us. I'd just gone through another grimoire when I came to a curious tincture with a ghastly name. The Bleeding Heart.

I ran a finger over an illustrated vial of pale purple liquid the matron had drawn into the margin, my pulse pounding at the familiar tincture. Wrath had an entire decanter filled with a similar liquid. I'd even sampled it when I'd sneaked into his personal library that first time.

Surely it couldn't be the same one, and yet I held my breath. It felt like I was reading a secret, one he'd certainly like to keep, but I *had* to know if this was what he was drinking and why. My attention fell upon the description—unlike the memory spell, this was just a simple list of ingredients along with its use. I read aloud to myself.

> To prevent the ill effects of love or other strong emotions from taking root.

I reread the handwritten note, clearly depicting its sole purpose. I had to be mistaken.

Bleeding heart plants were toxic to mortals, but Wrath wasn't

mortal. I read over the list of ingredients, my stomach twisting into knots. Bleeding Heart petals. Vanilla bean. A drop of lavender oil. Brandy. Orange peels, dried with purple dragonfire and set to distill under a full moon. Almost all the flavors I'd identified in that lavender liquor. The very drink Wrath poured himself tonight. A night filled with high emotion.

"Goddess above."

That's how the curse hadn't attacked again. Wrath was magically dulling his emotions, unwilling to fall in love again and have our world torn apart. A strange mixture of understanding and horror washed over me. I recalled the night I'd first seen him drink it—we'd just come back from the matron's after our dip in the Crescent Shallows.

He'd been pacing and showing far too much emotion. Something I'd pointed out when I'd asked him to sit and stop making me nervous. Then he'd tossed back a single drink, offered me some that I refused. And he'd regained that cold efficiency again shortly thereafter.

Tonight, he'd been wound tightly, furious and likely close to the edge after I'd wrenched the truth of the vampires' mission. And he'd relaxed shortly after his drink. I'd mistaken it for the food nurturing him, now I knew it wasn't the alcohol or snack, it was the tonic. At least in part.

"What have you done?" I whispered to the empty room.

My shoulders slumped forward as I continued to stare at the ingredients. If Wrath hadn't discovered a way to lock his feelings up tightly, I'd be wrenched away again. I knew that, logically, he'd done this for us, and yet my own heart ached at the realization that my husband could not allow himself to love me. He'd even gone so far as to magically bind himself.

"Lady Emilia?" Fauna burst in, her scarlet nightgown reminding me of a torn-out heart, then stopped short when she took in my expression. "What's wrong?"

I glanced at the spell one more time, allowing my fury to replace the sadness. I was not upset with Wrath; I was furious at our circumstances. At the people who were so wrapped up in hate they dampened the fire of our love. I looked at Fauna, my hands curling into fists.

"I want to end this curse once and for all. I want to break the spell-lock. And I want to fully claim my king."

My friend's face split into a lovely, fierce grin. "Let's get to work then."

SEVENTEEN

"**We should start** with one curse at a time." I slid some journals over to where Fauna had taken a seat beside me. I briefly caught her up on what I'd discovered, and grim determination filled her features. "The spell-lock isn't technically a curse, but I'd like to see what we can find about that, too. Options on how to break it. If it's even breakable aside from removing the heart. Any potential consequences."

"Right," Fauna said, looking over a hefty grimoire. "And what of his majesty's curse?"

"A priority. What do we know about it?"

"Sursea cast it after she made a blood sacrifice to a goddess."

That drew my attention. "Do you know which one?"

My friend shook her head. "His majesty has been trying to figure that out, but only recalls her casting a spell with spilled blood."

Dark magic required sacrifice. Blood. Bones. All the things Nonna Maria warned us away from. And yet something there didn't quite make sense… "Why would a goddess require a blood offering?"

Fauna blinked, seeming taken aback. "Because that's what the witches always do."

And the lesson I'd been taught thus far was that witches could not be trusted.

"Would you be willing to test a theory out?" I asked, hatching a plan.

Excitement flashed in her eyes. "Does it require blood?" I nodded, and her grin widened as she removed a slim dagger she'd hidden under her skirts. Sometimes I forgot that her sin aligned with wrath and that bloodshed made her soul sing. "Who am I making an offering to?"

"The goddess of fury."

Bless her willingness to help, Fauna didn't hesitate, she pricked her finger and squeezed a few drops of blood over a candle, the sacrifice steaming in the flickering flame. "I bid the goddess of fury to come forth."

We sat there silently, both tensed as I waited to feel any indication that magic was at hand. Any magical tug or pull to heed someone's call. Fauna's brow creased as she looked me over. "Anything?"

I closed my eyes for a second and tried to manifest *something*. "No."

She added another drop of blood and repeated her prayer. I closed my eyes, concentrating hard for another minute. Then two. There was still no inner urge to go to her, to do her bidding. I felt as I always did. Just as I'd suspected. I thought of my mother, the Crone, being summoned by any creature or being who spilled blood and commanded her to their side. It was laughable. Blood was used to summon a demon, but only in conjunction with several other items. Most of which were specific to each demon prince along with a specific spell.

"Maybe it's because you're not fully restored." Fauna sounded unsure. "Or maybe the sacrifice wasn't large enough."

I shook my head. "Before you start sacrificing anything larger, I'd like to test it out on my sister. She is fully restored and should heed the call if the magic of a blood sacrifice does, indeed, work for a goddess."

Fauna's brows raised nearly to her hairline. "If his majesty finds out—"

"I'll take full responsibility. Please," I added when she hesitated, "try."

"I hope we both don't live to regret this." She inhaled deeply and pressed her blade into another fingertip. "I pray to the goddess of death to come forth."

Tension crept into the chamber, making the air feel suddenly colder. The shadows cast by the candles and lanterns even seemed to flicker more menacingly. Death could be lurking, but it could simply be my imagination willing it. We both waited, breath held, for something to happen. A strained moment passed, followed by another. There was no Vittoria. And thankfully no Wrath coming to break up our goddess-summoning test.

I exhaled. "I'll try with my blood."

With my own dagger, I pricked my finger. Instead of allowing a drop to fall into the flames, I stood and held my hand over the skull. "I bid the goddess of death to come forth."

Part of me believed the wind gusted outside a bit harder, that the elements reacted in some monumental way to the magical request, but

I knew deep down nothing had changed. Even with my half-goddess blood, it wasn't enough to summon a full deity. Which meant the witches either knew that and had purposely misled their enemies, or they'd been misled themselves.

"I need to get to the Shadow Realm." I turned back to where Fauna still perched on the edge of her stool. "I'm going to ask my sister what she knows about spells cast with blood."

And then I'd find a way to cast another truth spell on her and see what other secrets she'd been keeping. Mainly, if she happened to know where a certain commander had gone.

It took more time than I'd like to have spent searching through grimoires—and Fauna even managed to persuade me to take a break to visit the Pit to see one of the fights—but eventually we came across an incantation to summon a werewolf. We gathered all the ingredients, then Fauna watched quietly as I set it up and began the summoning.

Within the salt circle, I sprinkled wolfsbane on the north, south, east, and west points before whispering the spell. Unlike when I'd summoned Wrath, the results of this circle were nearly instant.

Domenico appeared in a snarling blast of magic that almost knocked me backward. He whipped around, eyes blazing as he took in the tower chamber. The salt circle. My demon friend who gave him a taunting finger wave. And then he turned to me. His claws shot out.

"You're going to regret this, Shadow Witch."

"If I received a coin every time I heard that, Greed would have cause for alarm."

"He already has plenty of cause to fear *me*."

My cold gaze traveled over the shifter, similar to the way he'd looked me over earlier last night. It was hard to believe only a few short hours had passed since I'd last seen him. His shirt was missing, and his trousers were half-untied. Fine hair trailed into his pants, between sculpted abdominal muscles. Some scars that looked like claw marks marred otherwise unblemished olive-toned skin. His dark hair was rumpled either from sleep or some other bedtime activity he'd been engaged in. The idea of ruining his tryst gave me far too much petty enjoyment.

"I wish to speak with Vittoria."

Domenico opened his mouth—likely to argue—then abruptly snapped it shut. He didn't want to say yes, but he couldn't refuse. Vittoria had clearly stated she wanted me to call on her.

“Fine.” His attention cut to Fauna. “She stays here.”

That suited me well enough. Fauna and I had already decided that she’d stand guard over my body while my spirit traveled to the Shadow Realm. I lifted a shoulder and dropped it, as if I’d considered his request. “Very well. Are you ready?”

“I don’t have much of a choice, do I?” he snapped, then motioned for me to come closer. I took a halting step forward, then paused, surveying him again. Domenico gave me a nasty look. “I need to attach our bodies.” At my expression of horror, he snarled, “My claws will do. Stand in front of me.”

Against my inner warning to not allow the werewolf’s instruments of death anywhere near my body, I did as he requested. Domenico turned me until my back was pressed to his chest. He hooked his arms under mine, sinking his claws into each shoulder. My teeth clenched from the pain, but I refused to let the shifter feel me flinch.

“My lady. Wait.” Fauna took a step toward us, her expression one of concern when the werewolf’s claws dug in further. I’d only ever been summoned to the Shadow Realm before, I’d never been the one to initiate, so I hadn’t known what to expect in terms of magical payment.

Yet something didn’t quite make sense.

My teeth gritted together as his claws lengthened, nearly hitting the bone. “Why do our bodies need to be attached to enter the spirit realm?”

Domenico brought his mouth to my ear, “Who said anything about the Shadow Realm?”

In a glittering whirl of power, a portal appeared. Before I could twist to Fauna, Domenico hoisted me up and jumped through. Magic sucked and pulled at me—it felt as if we’d stepped into the heart of a hurricane and the only thing tethering me to my body was the shifter’s claws. Almost as quickly as it had begun, we stepped out of the portal and into a room I knew well. Any disorientation I’d felt from the portal disappeared almost instantaneously.

Domenico released me and moved away, watching as my attention darted around the space. Limestone walls and floors. A little cabinet set into a corner that I knew contained cooking supplies, two cutting boards, knives, bowls. I was in the monastery. In the very room Antonio and I had last made bruschetta together. Right before my world upended. A wave of sadness hit me when I thought of my old friend and how brutally he’d been killed.

“Blood and bones.” I pressed a hand to my shoulder and glanced sharply at the werewolf. “Why are we here?”

“You wanted to speak with your sister. This is where she is.”

“Nearly all the princes of Hell are searching for her, and she came

to the most obvious place."

"One, the demons cannot leave the Seven Circles at the moment. And two, your mortal home is likely the last place they'd expect to find her, given your very reaction."

My heart beat entirely too fast. Vittoria had come home. To the mortal world. Part of me wanted to push past the shifter and run for the door. Instead, I remained frozen.

I longed to rush to my home and have Nonna make sweetened ricotta and smooth my hair back while telling me everything would be all right. That the last few months were only a nightmare, a strange fever dream brought on by her superstitious tales. And maybe a bit too much wine. It very well could be an illusion. Maybe I *was* still in our trattoria, and Nonna's warnings about the sea being stirred by the devil was true. Maybe it *had* all been make-believe, the result of an imagination well tended by reading books. Maybe Claudia and I had drunk ourselves into a stupor and had crafted this unbelievable tale about the devil being cursed.

Nervous laughter bubbled up my throat. In a strange way, being part of a story made sense. Especially when faced with my current reality.

I could go home now. I knew in my bones that Nonna would hex me if I asked her to. I imagined she'd be all too willing to play along in my denial fantasy—to make me hate and fear the seven princes of Hell once more. She'd steal my memories, and I'd live a normal mortal life, dying at a respectable age surrounded by grandchildren and a wrinkled husband.

Perhaps every once in a while I'd dream of a handsome devil with alluring gold eyes, thinking he was just a character in a romance novel I'd once read. No matter how tempting it was to forget my heartache and the betrayal, losing Wrath again was a price I was unwilling to pay.

"How did you manage to bring us here? We didn't use the gates." I met Domenico's hard stare as I sorted it all out on my own. Then I understood. "The witches' magic only locked those from the outside, they didn't prevent you from bringing anyone out through other means."

And Envy couldn't *transvenio* us to this realm before we'd gone to House Pride because as far as I remembered, that could be done only during the days before and after a full moon.

"Shifters don't deal with witches," Domenico said. "They are one step up from demons. And we do not need to travel through the gates to access other realms like others do."

But a goddess, even one from Hell, was clearly immune from that hostility. I recalled the way wolves worshipped higher powers,

perhaps it was the strength of magic they respected. Or maybe in his own way, the wolf cared for my twin, though the feelings didn't seem to be returned. My twin was rather indifferent to her latest lover, which made me wonder if she cared for someone else—if she was even capable of that sort of feeling—and was using the wolf in more ways than one.

"Do the portals work for the princes?" I asked.

"No. My—a wolf saw to it that no demon can use a portal for now."

I studied him. Domenico clearly was going to say something aside from "wolf." Which made me think of the mysterious Marcella Blade had mentioned.

"I heard a rumor from a vampire recently." A phrase my mortal self would never once imagine uttering. "He mentioned meeting a half-demon half-werewolf companion with Vittoria."

Domenico snorted. "Vampires are liars. You cannot trust a word that comes out of their fanged mouths. No werewolf would ever sink so low as to bed a demon. At least not if he wished to retain any sort of respectable standing in the pack."

"Pretend as if it were possible. Would a werewolf with demon blood be able to travel to the Shadow Realm?"

"I told you," Domenico gritted out between clenched teeth, "vampires lie."

Wrath hadn't mentioned anything about Blade lying. And he certainly would have since it would prove our theory about Vesta being alive correct. Domenico was hiding something, and no amount of badgering would get him to talk. It also didn't escape my notice that he'd been very quick to point out a "he" as the culprit who'd bedded a demon. I could use a truth spell, but I needed to stay in his good graces so that he would take me back home. "Where is Vittoria?"

Domenico headed for the door. "I'll escort you to her now."

We didn't speak as we moved through the quiet monastery. Mummies lined up on either side of us, their silent, lifeless eyes cast in our direction, watching but not truly seeing our passage. Above us in the rafters a bird flapped its wings—everything was so similar to when I'd been here last it made me swallow my rising discomfort. I wondered where the holy brotherhood was, if they were lying in wait. And they weren't the only foes to be concerned about.

I still felt that same sense of an otherworldly presence, as if the Umbra demons were lurking in the shadows, watching my every move to report back to whichever prince of Hell had hired their services. Only this time, I wished they'd go fetch their master.

If the ghostlike demons were really there, then perhaps Envy would know where I was and would leave the fight at the Pit and

show up as he often did. His meddling wouldn't be unwelcome this time, a sign things had well and truly changed in my world. Though none of that mattered since the portals and gates were all locked and the princes couldn't leave if they tried.

"Do you—"

"Quiet. We don't need the brotherhood interfering." Domenico pushed the back door open, its hinges creaking loudly, as he stuck his head out and listened. It had been late afternoon when we'd left the Seven Circles, but it was fully evening here.

We stepped into the balmy night, and I inhaled the familiar air scented with orange blossoms and plumeria. Stars twinkled overhead like they knew a secret and were excited at the prospect of its discovery. Instead of feeling like I'd finally come home, the warmth almost felt unnatural now, stifling and oppressive. It made me crave the snow and ice and the demon who commanded it.

As we crossed the silent courtyard, I looked to the street that would take me to Sea & Vine. It was dark, but people were walking around. Our trattoria would still be open, serving the last of its guests for the evening. Nonna and my mother would be in the kitchen, humming as they prepared food. Uncle Nino and my father would be in the dining room, chatting with guests as they poured limoncello and laughed. I could go there now. Join them.

Despite its many terrible flaws that had been exposed, it had been a good life. Regardless of what Vittoria said, I knew she'd been happy, too. We'd been surrounded by love and light. We had a family who cared for us and a community. We'd had each other.

As far as curses went, ours wasn't hateful. Unlike Wrath, who'd had his heart proverbially torn from him and was then forced to feel hate in place of love, we'd forgotten everything of our past. All our schemes. Our thirst for vengeance. We had been given a new set of memories that might have been filled with fear of the devil and his wicked brothers, but it wasn't all bad.

Domenico cut a look my way. "You don't have to be quiet now. We're far enough away."

"It's a lot to sort through."

For the first time since we'd met in the Shadow Realm, the werewolf seemed to understand and sympathize. Which, I supposed he did. His world had altered as irrevocably not too long before. He'd adjusted, though he still seemed hostile about it. Perhaps that was the alpha magic still wreaking havoc on him until he matured. Or maybe he resented being a shifter.

"Eventually, you'll learn to focus on the present and let the past go." He guided us down a side street I knew well. "Reliving what could have been but never will be is pointless. It'll only hold you back

from what you are. One of the hardest things anyone can do is live in the here and now. Not worry about the future, not rehash the past. Be present, that's the secret to changing your future. To finding true happiness."

I mulled that over. "Are you happy?"

"Sometimes." Domenico lifted a shoulder. "It's better than when I first found out… everything."

"How is your father? He seemed worried but proud last time I spoke to him."

The shifter stiffened for a beat, then kept walking, his long strides eating up the cobbled path. Almost as if he wished to run away from the question. "Dead."

My own steps faltered. I didn't want to press on a wound that was clearly fresh, but I needed to know. "Did my sister—"

"Of course not." Domenico spun on his heel, his eyes flashing pale purple. He immediately glanced around, making sure no humans had seen, then visibly strained to rein his emotions in. "Your sister had nothing to do with it."

"What about demons?"

"What about them?" Domenico asked.

"Did this have to do with Greed?"

At the mention of Greed's name, the wolf's claws shot out. "It was pack business. Leave it at that."

I held my hands up in a gesture of peace, and the werewolf resumed his forward trek through the neighborhood bordering ours. Unwittingly, Domenico had given me two answers I'd been looking for. If Vittoria was really hell-bent on creating a larger rift between wolves and demons, killing a pack member would have been a prime opportunity. And the alpha had a large emotional reaction to Greed's name.

My focus shifted from my twin and the wolf issues and latched onto the road we'd just turned down. I stopped walking, unable to pick one foot up and place it in front of the other again. Near the end of the street sat our family home.

Vines curled up and around the trellis, the pale stone gleaming in the moonlight. It was beautiful. Untouched. It had continued on as if nothing had changed at all. My mouth was suddenly parched. Of all the places Vittoria could go, this carved deep.

"My sister is in our house."

Domenico shook his head. "Look closer."

"I don't—" The corner of our house *shimmered*, lifting slightly at the edges. Like an invisible page had been placed over the whole structure and had come loose in a breeze. My pulse pounded, and I stepped back, shaking my head. "No. No, no. Not this, too. Please."

Vittoria was suddenly in front of me, her hair blowing from that same magical wind that was now tearing pieces of our house away. “Demand to see its truth, Emilia.”

“I cannot—”

“Yes. You can and you will,” Vittoria said. “Look at the truth.”

My eyes burned as tears prickled behind my lids. This was the final blow, and I refused to allow one single tear to fall. *Enough.* Something inside me snapped. I was tired of sadness and devastation. I was over all the endless lies and manipulations and days and nights spent crying. My twin was right. I deserved to know the truth, to see it once and for all.

My spine straightened as I set my attention back on our unassuming home. I called forth my magic’s source and aimed it straight at the shimmering part. “Show me the truth.”

My voice echoed with power just like when I’d cast a truth spell. Magic whipped out and sank into the exterior walls like claws, shredding and ripping apart the illusion. I watched impassively as the facade was stripped away, revealing a stone temple.

Our home was glamoured. And I’d never known, never sensed the magic that had been used. Because Nonna kept us ignorant. The truth didn’t break my heart this time; it made me furious. There was no coming back from this deception. A line of demarcation had been drawn—the Emilia before her entire world shattered, and the goddess of fury after all had been revealed.

“What else?” I demanded, gaze fixed on our so-called home. “What else has been an elaborate illusion? A fucking lie.”

“I’ll leave you two.” Domenico quietly entered the temple, not sparing either me or Vittoria a second glance. I braced myself for the final betrayal I sensed was coming.

“This is not truly Sicily.” Vittoria exhaled. My attention finally left the house that wasn’t our home to settle on my twin. For once, she seemed pained. “Welcome to the Shifting Isles.”

EIGHTEEN

I flinched as if I'd received a physical blow.

I'd thought I'd felt the worst sting of betrayal when I'd learned my grandmother used dark magic to murder innocent witches to bind us. *This* was agony. Unrelenting, torturous, emotional agony. Vittoria said nothing as the initial shock slowly began to wear off.

"The Shifting Isles." *This* was why she told me to meet her here, that night in the spirit realm. I glanced down the street, stomach twisting. It was all a lie. Every last part of it. Down to the very world I thought I knew. No wonder Wrath hadn't wanted to say more when I'd asked about the isles. It was something I had to discover on my own. I was grateful no princes could travel here now. I needed time and space to reconcile just how much had been kept from me without the demons around.

I'd once asked Wrath where mortal souls were sent, and he'd vaguely spoken of an island off the western shore of the Seven Circles. Given the map lesson my sister had shown me the last time I saw her, this location definitely fit that description.

"This is where mortal souls are sent." I didn't ask, but Vittoria nodded. "The prison of damnation."

"Yes." My sister's voice was quiet, soft. As if she sensed my power was searching for anyone to latch onto. To punish. Or maybe there was some human part of her left after all. A part that understood how deeply this particular wound went. "Some would consider this to be the worst of the circles. The island shifts time and place. Becomes the reality you choose it to be. Or the reality someone else chooses. For a time."

"And do the mortals here know? That this is…"

"No," Vittoria said softly. "Most mortals are entirely unaware that

this isn't truly the city or country they believe it to be. Only select supernaturals know the truth. And some souls that escaped to the demon realm and fight for a chance to return here."

"I see." Hell. That's what it felt like. Not the Seven Circles where the demons ruled. Not the devil's elegant castle. Or in any of the Houses of Sin where vice and debauchery reigned above all. Here. In the place I'd once called home. This isle was where hell truly existed. "We've never been part of the mortal world."

"No, we haven't." My twin's attention dropped to the ground as if she couldn't bear to look at me. "The Star Witches would never allow that risk. They sent us here, to this time and place, where witches had to remain in hiding. We could step through to another reality now if you'd like. It helps. To see the truth play out."

"No." My tone was harsher than I'd intended. "I cannot… I just—I'm not ready."

Seeing another reality, another time or dimension, would snip the last thread of sanity I'd been clutching. Vittoria offered a small smile. "All right."

"Have the witches somehow been alerted to our presence here?" I asked. My sister shook her head. That was positive at least. "Are they able to summon us through a blood sacrifice?"

"We are not like demons or other supernaturals. No one can summon gods."

My mind spun onto the next question. "How often does the isle shift?"

"From what I know, it's multiple underworld dimensions folded on top of one another. It's hard to explain, but there are infinite realities happening at once. Though it's not always a perfect system. At times there will be slight inconsistencies only noticeable to those who are native to whichever time or place is the current reality. Many will simply overlook any oddities they might notice; the truth is much harder for them to digest, and therefore they avoid it. Magic and science are both hard at work, ensuring none of the timelines fully bleed together."

Which was why it had taken Wrath so long to find us. He'd had to search a place that could be anytime, anywhere. It was an incredible feat that he'd managed to locate us at all…

"You." My gaze snapped to my twin. "You summoned a demon, which alerted Wrath to where we were." I thought back to the note I'd found on Wrath's desk. "Greed. You'd summoned Greed under the guise of forming an alliance. Then you left those summoning spells for me to find, just in case." Hope blossomed in my chest. My sister couldn't be all bad. "Why?"

Vittoria grabbed my hand and squeezed it gently before letting go.

“Because one of us deserves a storybook ending.”

I wrapped my arms around my twin and hugged her tight. “That doesn’t sound very House Vengeance of you.”

Vittoria held me back, her sudden laughter tinged with sadness. “If you tell anyone, I’ll murder your firstborn. Plus, I would hardly say binding House Greed to my cause was altruistic.”

My lips curved upward, knowing full well the goddess of death would never murder my firstborn. I wished to halt time and just stay in this moment with my twin. But wishes didn’t exist in this place, only pain and heartbreak. I held Vittoria a little closer, then finally let go. For a brief moment, her eyes had returned to that warm brown.

“You didn’t really kill Greed’s commander, did you?”

She heaved a sigh. “No, but I would have loved to. Not because I dislike her, but just to twist the dagger for Greed a little more.”

“Perhaps you ought to keep that opinion to yourself next time you see Greed or any of the other princes.” I exhaled. Despite learning the very foundation of my world had been a lie, a heavy weight was lifted from my shoulders. I knew deep down my twin couldn’t be the ice queen she’d been pretending to be. She’d been too warm, too full of life to lose it all when she’d become immortal again. “Vesta wasn’t stabbed. She was… eaten.”

Vittoria’s brows raised, looking half-impressed, half-aghast. “Gruesome way to go.”

“I have cause to believe *she’s* not dead. And I think you are intimately aware of that. I also believe you know who did die in that chamber.” I watched my twin, whose expression turned unreadable. “You need to tell me the whole story. Why Vesta wanted to leave. Who took her place. Where she is now. Greed called for a blood retribution. And Wrath granted it. If you don’t confess your innocence in front of Wrath soon and bring him proof, the other princes will eventually hunt you down.”

“Life would be rather dull if no one ever threatened to obliterate a rival House.” My sister grinned, avoiding giving me any more answers about Vesta’s disappearance and whose body was found. She did give me some information, which would need to be good enough for now. “I’m pleased to have caused such strong emotions in Greed. He must well and truly be put off that I’d do such a thing after forming an alliance.” She playfully nudged my side. We both knew she hated that prince for reasons she still hadn’t shared. “Perhaps it’s true love.”

“And what of Pride? Did it remain only a game to you or did you become attached?”

Vittoria’s spine straightened, and darkness fell across her features. “That demon ought to count his curses that I haven’t paid him a visit.”

I studied my sister out of the corner of my eye. I’d once felt as

strongly about my wish to stab Wrath, and now I couldn't stop myself from thinking of his troublesome mouth and all the wickedly delightful things he could do with it. Vittoria slanted a look in my direction.

"Don't. I see what you're thinking, and I swear I'll slow your heart until you lose consciousness."

"You know"—I looped my arm through Vittoria's and started walking down the cobbled road that was nothing more than an illusion—"someone once told me hate is rooted in passion. Perhaps you ought to visit Pride and work out your issues."

"I'd rather bathe in pig's shit."

"Mmh-hmm. Speaking of pigs, if you wish for me to find my storybook ending, why do you keep warning me away from Wrath?"

Vittoria stared off at a point in the distance, though I had the impression she was actually looking inward. "If you become part of his House, you cannot corule over ours. So many things have changed, and I don't want to lose one more familiar thing. Regardless, I wanted you to discover the whole truth before you bound yourself fully to him, so you could make a true choice, with all the facts, between love and your House."

There was the sister with a mortal soul. "Change is terrifying, but we *are* the Feared. Or so you keep insisting."

Vittoria snorted. "Are you telling me to have some dignity?"

"You said it, dear sister. Not me." I smiled as she rolled her eyes. "You know, Wrath said there would be no issue if I wished to reestablish our House."

Vittoria's head snapped in my direction. "Did he now?"

I nodded. "If you stop your campaign to stir up trouble and create inner conflict, it might be something I'm interested in. But I won't help you if you keep pitting everyone against one another. That's not the sort of life I want anymore."

We strolled to the end of what had been our street; the silence was comfortable, but my thoughts had shifted to more pressing matters again. Ones that needed to be addressed before we left this fantasy and returned to the Seven Circles. My sister was wanted in that realm, and we needed to ensure her safety. We paused at the next street, and I lifted my face toward the heavens. The air was balmy, the salty sea breeze pleasant. Yet chills raked down my body.

I dropped Vittoria's arm and faced her. "If you are harboring Vesta, or Marcella, or whoever she's calling herself, you need to tell Wrath. He will sense the truth of it, and you'll be cleared of any wrongdoing. Please. I cannot lose you, too. Not after all of this." I motioned to the world around us. "Please, Vittoria. Just tell me she's alive and well and you have a damn good reason for making a

powerful enemy."

Vittoria pressed her lips together and glanced away. If I was correct and Vesta was alive—which I fully believed to be the truth—my sister was not going to confess anything to me. I had to trust she had a reason, something more powerful than vengeance that drove her.

"Who is the actual villain in this sordid tale?" I asked instead. "Us? The demons? Witches?"

Vittoria thought carefully. "Depending on whose side you're on, I suppose it could be all of us. Though I find the most fault with witches and demons. Their dislike of each other has gone on forever, and they never should have dragged us into their issues."

I blew out a long breath.

"No wonder it hasn't been a simple path to unraveling the mystery. You and I schemed against Pride and Wrath. Pride was careless with his consort's heart. Which enraged the First Witch. Sursea cursed Wrath when he wouldn't whisk away her daughter from Pride, Wrath responded in kind, and the Star Witches upheld their duty to keep the Feared and the Wicked locked away, even if it meant sacrificing their own."

"And on and on the blame goes," Vittoria finished. "I don't think it matters who the first villain is or was—we've all done terrible things."

"But someone did help Vesta escape Greed's court. And someone is truly dead."

Vittoria stared off into the distance for another moment. "I was told the vampires came to steal you away. Perhaps there is a new threat emerging, one that's slipping in while chaos breaks loose."

"You were the one who sparked that particular fire."

"I didn't think they'd come for you. I thought they'd set their sights on House Greed."

"Why? What is it about Greed that's making you do such horrid things?"

"I haven't done *horrid* things," she countered. "I've only done to him what he's done to others. Maybe the vampires have their own war goals, and I accidentally gave them hope of winning."

Frustration built in my chest. If my sister would just trust me with the truth, this could all be remedied. "While I don't doubt the vampires would love to start an internal war to distract from their own schemes, I don't think they're responsible."

"Mmh." Vittoria's gaze took on that faraway look again. "Perhaps it's the witches then. They probably heard of my alliance with Greed and targeted his House to start strife. I'm sure they're hoping the demons will remove us from the playing board once and for all."

“Vittoria,” I warned. “Stop. I know it’s not the witches or demons or wolves. Just tell me the truth. Why keep so many secrets?”

“Perhaps you’ll just have to trust me.”

“After all you’ve done? All the lies and half-truths and games?”

Anger crossed my twin’s face.

“I have been trying to work around the curse, break your magic free, reestablish connections to this world, and have done the best I can. If it’s coming across as lies and manipulation, I am truly sorry, Emilia. But I have my reasons. And you’ll simply need to honor that or continue battling me. If the witches didn’t do what they did to us, then none of this would have happened. And if you believe they’ll sit back and allow us to regain our full power without attempting to bind it again, you’re mad.” Vittoria turned to me, her expression calculating. “There is one way for us to ensure they don’t succeed.”

I held a hand to my chest, my heart pounding faster the longer my sister held my gaze. “Is there no other way to break the spell-lock?”

“Not that I’ve discovered. Believe me, I looked before I had mine torn out.”

“Who did tear your heart out?” I asked. “Domenico?” “Many creatures in the underworld were only too happy to be considered for the task. Leave it at that for now.” Vittoria’s gaze iced over before it softened again. “You won’t have to worry about that, though. I’ll be with you.” I paced away, and my sister just watched without comment as I walked back and forth, my mind and heart racing. The witches bound us. And yet I couldn’t stop thinking about Envy’s reaction to when Vittoria first wished to remove my spell-lock. He’d been so opposed.

And Wrath didn’t really speak about it much at all. I knew he was uncertain, yet my sister had survived. She’d returned to her full goddess self. Which made me wonder once again if there was another reason Wrath didn’t say more. I thought of the Viperidae attack—how after the snakelike demon had bitten me, Wrath used magic that took the venom into his own body.

I also recalled something saccharine sweet he’d made me drink…

“Goddess above. He gave me nectar.”

Ambrosia. The food of the gods.

I stopped pacing and stared at nothing. He’d also given me something sweet to drink when I’d had the mild case of hypothermia. More nectar. More goddess-healing fuel. Wrath couldn’t be worried about my dying. So what else would motivate him to use such caution? I resumed my pacing, letting my mind run over different theories and scenarios until one separated itself from the rest.

Envy was fearful that day in our cell. So were Lust and Sloth and even Greed when I’d lost my temper and set that painting ablaze. And

Wrath… he might not be afraid of me, but all the princes of Hell had called us the Feared. My husband didn't fear for *my* life, he feared for his realm. He feared setting me free, fully. Wrath didn't actively stop me, but he certainly wasn't helping, either. This choice was mine and mine alone.

I spun around and met my sister's patient gaze.

"I'm ready," I said, meaning it.

Over these last few weeks, Wrath had been showing me how to control my emotions. To see past my fury. *That* was the lesson he'd taught me the night he'd forced me to stab him, the night he'd said was about sensing other sins and combating them. Yes, learning to steel myself against pride, greed, and lust had been important. But all along, Wrath knew what House of Sin I ruled over, knew how potently my desire for vengeance could grow.

Until I'd stabbed him that night, I would have continued down a path in which I craved blood. And he'd been right—I didn't wish to admit it then, but I *hated* hurting him in that moment. Hated that loss of control, that overwhelming feeling of only being driven by my rage. I ruled over that emotion, and I would not allow it to rule over me.

In the throne room with the vampire emissary and Sursea, my rage had nearly taken over then, too. But it didn't. I could not rely on Wrath or anyone else to pull me from that dark place again. It *had* to come from me. Stalling myself from unleashing my full power any longer would only ensure one thing: I'd fail by not trying.

Fear would hold me back. But faith in myself would set me free.

"Would you be able to… if I—" I drew in a deep breath. "I don't wish to lose control."

"Understandable." Vittoria nodded. "I'll be here. You have nothing to fear about the change. It's disorienting at first, but it feels like taking a large breath of fresh air after being submerged in the sea."

I exhaled and nodded. "All right. I'm ready to break the spell-lock now."

Vittoria led us back toward our childhood home. The flap of illusion that had peeled back was securely in place again, making the building look as it had my whole life. We walked up the stairs and entered through the front door, and what had once been a small living space now had cathedral ceilings and decadent furnishings. It smelled of honey and wildflowers.

On the far wall in the first chamber were shelves of books; another nook had a wall of jars with hearts. I averted my gaze and walked toward an altar set off to one side. Giant bowls of fire crackled to either side of it, the flames a beautiful, glittering black.

Vittoria snapped her fingers, and suddenly a werewolf appeared holding a lavender garment. The young woman looked to be in her

midtwenties, and there was something familiar about the shade of her eyes and the shape of her face. She quickly averted her gaze and moved back. My twin motioned for me to step up onto the dais. “Put this on. Then lie on the altar with your arms relaxed at your sides and your legs straight out.”

Relaxing wasn’t something I thought I could achieve, but I gingerly took the item, which turned out to be a billowing gown, and quickly undressed and slipped it on.

It had two large swaths that tied over each shoulder and continued down the front. A silver rope tied it together at the waist, and two slits ran up to midthigh. The deep V of the front granted access to my spell-locked heart and had my mortal one beating furiously. I refused to think about how it would soon cease beating at all. A flash of calmness blew over me, almost as if propelled on a magical wind. All would be well. I glanced to the werewolf who’d brought the clothing and wondered if she’d somehow altered my mood. It was rare and covetable magic. The princes of Hell could influence sins, but to influence joy was something else entirely.

Letting that oddity go, I squared my shoulders and climbed onto the altar, lying as my twin had instructed. Vittoria stood over me, then surveyed the chamber where the lone shifter waited, standing guard, I realized.

“We’re not to be disturbed.” My sister glanced at me, her lavender eyes glowing as she called upon her power. “It will be over quickly.”

Before I had time to give in to my rising panic, Vittoria’s fingers lengthened and her claws punched through my chest. For a moment, I could hardly believe she’d done it.

Then I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. My chest *burned*. Violently. It felt as if half a dozen knives had been set in a fire and then shoved into my body. That pain was so acute, so overwhelming, that I didn’t feel anything else. The hold on my mind, my memories, the whole spell-lock cracked like an egg, and everything came flooding back.

My life.

My House.

My power. In my mind’s eye I saw me and Wrath, making love and training and battling wits and wills. Another memory: my twin scheming with me in our throne room. I saw Sursea coming to us with her plan, her need for vengeance fueling my sin. Then I was in the garden and I saw the look on Wrath’s face right before everything was torn away.

The scream I couldn’t get out before ripped through me now, echoing in the temple. It was rage and torment given form. I heard shifters scatter from wherever they’d been hiding. And I screamed

until the memories slowed.

Darkness swept in as quickly as the pain had, then I didn't feel or think of anything at all.

Once the pain receded and the darkness faded, I lay as still as a statue, listening. Several rooms away I heard the swish of a skirt, the soft tread of slippers. Hushed voices. Closer there was a sharp intake of breath as if someone had awoken suddenly.

I kept my eyes closed as I adjusted to my new range of hearing. My sharper senses. One thing stood out immediately. My pulse did not pound. I inhaled deeply and slowly exhaled.

The lack of a heartbeat wasn't as disorienting as I'd thought it would be. Though perhaps that was because I no longer felt fear the same way. I cracked an eye, surprised to see streaks of red and gold creeping in through the windows and under the door. Dawn had arrived. I must have been out longer than I'd thought.

I sat up and nearly launched myself across the room, my fully immortal body filled with incredible strength. I already knew no one was in the chamber with me, but I glanced around with new eyes. Vittoria had been right; it felt as if I'd been submerged below water and my head finally broke the surface. Colors were brighter, more intense. I could see individual threads on my gown. Dust motes glittered in a sliver of sunlight on the opposite end of the temple.

I felt full of energy, revitalized. I leapt onto the altar in one jump, then hurtled into the air, landing gracefully on the other side of the chamber. A strange, familiar feeling started in my center. In place of my heart, there was the steady thrumming of my power. It felt like coming home after being away for far too long.

"Fiat lux."

Roses and wildflowers burst into flame around the entire chamber. The fire roared with fury, sparking my own rage and igniting it. This power, this was what made me one of the Feared. There was no ending to it, only my desire to keep it locked away that kept it caged. I thought of Nonna Maria. I recalled her lies. The hurt. And the flowers burned impossibly brighter. My head cocked to the side as a familiar sound caught my attention.

I recognized my sister's footsteps before I turned to her. "Would you like to exact a little vengeance before I leave?"

Her lips slowly tugged upward. "It's good to have you back, Fury."

NINETEEN

Back in House Wrath, I sensed a myriad of things at once. Servants bustling through the lower levels, demon soldiers running drills on some compound I'd yet to visit. A few angry members of the nobility arguing—their wrath sparking like little embers in my periphery.

What captured almost all my attention was my husband. His energy was like a raging inferno flanked by towers of ice. It was incredible. Like his *luccicare* I'd seen, his magic was a multitoned black with specks of gold. Glittering and dangerous. Like him.

Wrath was still at the Pit—I felt the pulse of his ferocious power from a distance away and would recognize it anywhere. There was a slight pull to him, but our reunion had to wait. Though, if I could sense his magic, I had little doubt he could also sense mine. I wouldn't have long before he came looking for his newly restored queen.

My focus was drawn to the Crone's tower next, where I knew Fauna was still working and I headed there at once. Time moved differently in hell dimensions, so I wasn't sure how long I'd been gone, but it couldn't have been that long or Wrath would have started searching for me. Doing my best not to startle my friend, I knocked gently—or so I'd thought—and the door crashed open. "Fauna?"

My friend jolted at the noise and twisted to face the door.

"Emilia! Thank the devil you're here, I found—" Fauna stood so abruptly her stool toppled over. She scanned my face—for presumably whatever familiar comfort she could find—and swallowed whatever she'd been about to say. "Your eyes…"

"I know." They were no longer warm brown. They were the rose-gold of my magic.

Her attention dropped to my chest. It didn't look any different. There was no scar, no trace of what my sister had removed. No

evidence at all that I'd had a spell-lock. Though, given Fauna's demon senses, she probably didn't hear my mortal heart beating anymore.

Something like sadness crept into her features, though I swore I sensed horror. It had a prickly feeling attached to it, distracting me. If this was how Wrath sensed emotions, it was uncomfortable and would take some getting used to. I had forgotten what this was like. I'd need to retrain myself to focus on sensing feelings only when it suited me, or I'd go mad.

"Did they force this upon you?" she asked quietly.

My brow arched. Having my true form back was hardly a curse. Yet my friend sounded as if she were speaking with the dead. I attempted a smile that had her swallowing harder. I sighed.

"No. No one forced me to do anything. Except maybe the witches when they forced me to be a player in their games."

I moved into the room on silent feet, and the sensation I'd felt radiating from Fauna escalated. Fear. That's what my friend felt in my presence now.

My fingers trailed over the open grimoires. The paper felt rougher, the scent of ink stronger. "Did you know they locked me in true hell? The Shifting Isles. Clever name for a magical island that can shift time and place. Seemed only right for that to be the place I returned to my true self."

A beat of silence passed. Followed by another. Fauna took me in again, scrutinizing. I picked up notes of smoke on my clothing, in my hair. She did, too. Suspicion laced her voice. "Did you attack them?"

My lips curved. "I might have paid them a visit."

"His majesty will—"

"The move against my betrayers was justified. What did you find?"

"I…" Fauna followed my gaze to where it landed on the grimoire she'd been reading. Some of her earlier excitement slowly returned as she pointed to the page. "I think I found a way to break the curse."

"The one on Wrath?"

"Yes, but that's not all." Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes, but it was better than before. The fear was also abating a little, though it still lingered uncomfortably. "The Blade of Ruination is more than a hexed object itself—it can somehow *destroy* curses and hexes. I'm not exactly sure how it works, but I found something else that might explain more."

She grabbed another text and shoved it toward me. An intricate map of House Wrath that featured tunnels and temples and caverns hidden below like underground cities and towns.

"There is a place on these grounds called the Well of Memory," Fauna continued. "And I believe it is the key to finding out more

about the Blade of Ruination." She pointed to a section of the map labeled GARDENS. "You must pay the goddess a tithe to enter the Well of Memory's chamber. It's unpleasant—the well must deem you worthy, and the memories it shows you are often nightmares others have purged. Or other things they wished to forget."

"Is that all?"

"It's not as easy as it sounds." Fauna bit her lip. "The well can trick you into thinking you are really *in* the memory it's showing you. Some are said to get stuck there for eternity, reliving the worst moments of memories that do not even belong to them."

It was not something I felt concerned over, but I knew spell-locked Emilia would. Fauna was doing remarkably well hiding her fear outwardly now, but I still sensed it simmering below the surface. My lack of fear didn't exactly frighten her, but it did make her uncomfortable. We couldn't afford to have any distractions with so much at stake—I needed to soothe over her worry so she could focus.

"How do you avoid that?" I asked.

Fauna's eyes narrowed, but she must have decided against inquiring if I was truly worried or appeasing her. She glanced down at the book in front of her.

"According to this text, if you focus on your question and don't lose sight of it, you'll be able to sift through memories until you find your answer. The memories are mostly imbued in clear quartz, hematite, amethyst, or lapis lazuli. You hold one crystal at a time while thinking of your question; supposedly it will attract the correct memory to you or vice versa."

I nodded, thinking of the question I needed the answer to the most. "You're certain this well will know the location of the Blade of Ruination if I ask it to show me where it is?"

"Theoretically, it should. Someone must know where it is, or at least know of someone who'd come into contact with it. Even if it's not directly spoken about, it might appear in a purged memory. It might not lead you to it directly, but it could give us a starting point." Fauna exhaled. "But I personally don't know anyone who's ever used the well successfully."

That caught my attention. "Not even the princes of Hell?"

"They cannot. No one knows why. His majesty certainly tried when the curse went into effect. He even allowed Envy to try to use it. Both attempts failed. They couldn't access any memories. Not from mortals, or demons, or any supernaturals."

How curious. "The well was here before the demon princes started their rule, correct?"

"Yes." Fauna nodded. "The goddess statue is new, but records indicate the well itself predates the formation of the Houses of Sin by

quite some time. But…"

"It doesn't predate me."

"No, Lady Emilia. Aside from the Crone and the Sisters Seven, there aren't many beings that were here before you and your twin."

If my spell-lock were still in place, I'd be disturbed by the idea of my lengthy existence. Instead, I cast my newly freed memory back, tunneling into a vast cavern that spanned what seemed like eons. Recalling a time before the princes of Hell left me with an impression of boredom. Debauchery. Back before the devil took his throne, Vittoria and I had greeted souls.

And they did not enjoy our welcome party.

We were ruthless, wicked creatures. And we reveled in it.

I had a clear impression that was why our mother had tampered with memories to begin with, why she'd also created the veil between the mountains separating House Vengeance from the rest of the Seven Circles. Celestia didn't want anyone to recall the time before the demons ruled. When worse creatures reigned.

Wrath's power shifted suddenly, drawing me into the present; it blinked out from where he'd been and reappeared closer. More powerful. It burned like the heat of the sun. He was angry. Savagely so.

Great Divine above, his wrath made my fury sing like a battle hymn. His attention reached out, and I knew he was sensing my power and following it to its source. Outside the tower, footsteps thundered down the corridor. Fauna quickly offered her good-byes and dashed out the door. Her emotions spiking wildly. Our king was in a wretchedly foul mood.

And I had a good indication why.

I perched against the table, waiting for what promised to be quite a display of emotion. His arrival did not disappoint. Wrath wrenched the door off its hinges and tossed it away as if it weighed nothing. Golden eyes blazed with his sin as they settled on mine. If there was a quick flash of relief, it was immediately replaced by the hardness of anger.

"The door did nothing to deserve that," I said.

"You could have died."

I made a show of carefully looking myself over. "Envy was correct. Immortality won out."

"It was a risk."

"A calculated one." I smiled. This time it didn't provoke fear. Wrath's steady gaze never wavered from my face, his anger still burning brightly between us. "I know why you didn't wish for the spell-lock to be broken." He crossed his arms over his chest and cocked a brow. Alluring, arrogant demon. "I am able to control my

fury. Your subjects have nothing to fear."

"Is that so?" Wrath shook his head. "The smell of smoke lingering on your clothes has nothing to do with vengeance? Somehow, I cannot picture you and your sister sitting around a fire, discussing times past like two civilized goddesses."

"A little act of vengeance was well deserved, and you know it." I gave him a hard stare, my power surging up to confront his before I gripped it tightly. "The witches ought to count their blessings I took only their restaurant and not their lives. They can rebuild. And they will think twice before crossing me again."

"You're right." Wrath sighed. "They'll think before directly attacking you. But that will not stop them from responding with fire of their own." He held my gaze, his own turning as icy as his tone. "Greed was called away from the Pit to his House. His spies spotted witches gathering in the mountains behind his circle. They're going to attack. Then they're going to blame you."

And that was the root of my husband's anger.

Greed would demand retribution from me as well as Vittoria and my prince would be forced to make a choice that would end in bloodshed. There would be no game Wrath and I could play to avoid that; more and more, Greed was becoming a problem. There was little doubt in my mind that he was responsible for the enchanted skull to cast suspicion on my twin. Whether he knew or suspected Vesta was alive didn't seem to matter. He wanted vengeance. And he'd use this as the perfect excuse to exact some.

My hands curled into fists at my sides. "Send a missive to House Greed requesting a visit immediately. We'll attack the witches before they strike. And this time, I will not be merciful. Let the witches and your brother see what I am capable of."

I spun on my heels and headed to my suite, my lavender gown billowing around me like a storm cloud. It was time to dress for war.

TWENTY

Sleet drummed icy claws along the stone parapet of House Greed. We stood silently on the narrow pathway, gazes locked onto the tree line in the distance, ignoring the frigid water pelting our battle leathers. A guard spotted a flicker of light toward the northwest. It was impossible to know if it was meant to distract or if it had been an accident. I doubted the witches would be so careless, given how calculated they were, but stranger things had happened when emotions ran high. Which made me wonder…

I surveyed the quiet grounds, magic primed and ready. Even with the sleet coming down hard, no birds or animals stirred in the woods. It seemed as if the whole circle was holding its breath, waiting. I hadn't yet sensed any fear. Greed's lawn extended hundreds of meters in all directions, a clever way to remove any cover for unfriendly or unwelcome visitors. Like witches.

My hand flexed at my side. When thinking of witches, it was impossible to not wonder about Nonna. If she was with the witches here now, I would not hesitate to defend the demons. Even if that meant I had to battle her. I prayed it wouldn't come to that, but there was no longer any telling what my "grandmother" was capable of.

Wrath's arm brushed against mine, his warmth a contrast to the winter storm. Wind gusted along the castle wall, growling low. Dark clouds had gathered above House Wrath shortly after our plan had been made. The current weather was no doubt a result of my husband's tense mood. His first request for us to be admitted into this circle hadn't been met well. After the incident with the gaming hall, the Prince of Greed wasn't eager to have me in his residence again. The Duke of Devon had also campaigned against me, advising his prince to not allow a vengeful witch into their House of Sin again. He

hadn't been informed that that vengeful witch was actually a goddess of the underworld and he ought to mind what he said.

A second, stern message had Greed grudgingly allowing me into his royal House, especially with the promise of aid. And a threat from Wrath's newly restored wife.

Fine hairs suddenly stood at attention along the back of my neck that had nothing to do with the icy wind. Demons wielding bows nocked their arrows, the sensation of their fear prickling over my skin like needles. Wrath didn't move, but I sensed his attention shift to the lawn beneath us. He felt what I did.

Greed signaled to a guard who peered over the edge. I stepped forward, that prickling feeling growing in intensity. And I realized it wasn't the guards' fear I was sensing. It was our enemies'. The witches were already here. My eyes narrowed at the seemingly empty lawn, then I noticed the tracks in the ice-coated grass. The broken blades had been trampled.

"Wait!" I cried out.

The guard didn't heed my warning. He leaned over the ledge, noticing what I had a second too late. Before anyone could act, blood burst from his eyes and he toppled over, crashing into the snow. Shouts rang out down the line, guards firing arrows into an enemy they couldn't see and, therefore, couldn't hit. If they continued like this, the witches would succeed.

And that was not something I'd allow to happen.

"Have them stand back," I yelled to Greed. "The witches are using magic."

"They are nothing but pathetic mortals. And we are using weapons." Greed signaled to the next line of guards.

Ignorant fool. He'd lead them into death.

Despite the miserable winter storm, my magic lit up the sky, plummeting like raging, vengeful stars shooting to earth. The rose-gold balls of fire hit with such speed they left craters in the ground. Screams rent the silence, the sound like animals being taken to slaughter.

I summoned more magic, more fire, watching emotionlessly as I rained fury down.

Whatever spell the witches had been using to render themselves invisible broke. Just as I imagined it would. Magic could only be battled with magic, and theirs was nothing but a mere dilution of what mine was. It was time to remind them of that.

"Fiat lux."

Hooded witches caught fire, their flesh burning and melting from their bones—the sickeningly sweet scent rising high. They fought back with impressive power of their own. They sent magic arrows

careening through the air, striking demons with enough force to fell them. I could end this now, end *them* now, but forced myself to fight fairly. I wanted Wrath to know for certain that I could be trusted, even when emotions were running high.

A magic arrow sliced through my arm, drawing my attention to the witch who'd fired it. Nonna wrenched her hood back, her expression hard. Her look indicated that I had chosen to become her enemy the moment I removed my spell-lock.

I stared at her for a moment, allowing myself to fully digest that she had fired the shot. I could kill her right now. Mete out justice and vengeance for what she'd done to me and my sister. And yet…

"Run," I mouthed to her.

It was the one and only warning I'd give. And it was more than she deserved.

I didn't look in her direction again, was unsure if she listened. In the end, she had made her choice just as I had made mine.

Demons to the left and right dropped, and I didn't know if they were dead or badly injured. I kept firing my magic at the front line, doing my best to push the witches back to the woods, to frighten them away from House Greed. Soon they'd give up; their magic wasn't unlimited. We only had to keep them from doing any serious damage while they depleted their sources. A task that shouldn't be too hard to achieve.

I sensed Wrath's ice magic, and then I heard a hiss of pain. I jerked my attention to him, seeing a magical arrow that had cleanly pierced his shoulder.

"Are you all right?" I shouted over the sudden roar of sleet and wind.

He gritted his teeth and yanked the arrow out. "They coated them with dragon's bane."

Another flew through the air, aimed straight for his throat, and I plucked it from the sky, snapping it in my fist. Two more arrows with the burning agent soared toward Wrath.

Nonna must have told the witches to aim for him to either distract or punish me for choosing him. Rage, white-hot and all-consuming, ricocheted through me. My husband was being targeted and that was where all pretense of civility ended for me. To hell with our plan.

"Enough." My voice was barely more than a whisper, but it carried over the guards and witches. It was like the gusting wind of a hurricane, and the witches must have sensed the danger sweeping in. They stopped firing their magical arrows, grabbed one another's hands and began chanting. As if their magic could ever hope to outdo mine, especially now that I was truly mad. I inhaled and drew in the power pulsing in my center, tapping into Source fully.

That well was never-ending. Infinite. With my spell-lock in place, my power had been skimming only the surface of what I was capable of. And the witches' anger, their fury over the reemergence of House Vengeance, the attack on Sea & Vine, and the fear I now felt coming from them in waves fueled me. I became every twisted tale they'd told. I embraced my true self. I was now Fury in the flesh, and they would not forget what it meant to strike out at a goddess.

Stories would be told in their coven of this battle. Warnings whispered in hushed tones as they kept one eye on the sky, searching for an omen that they'd stoked my sin by even daring to speak of this day at all. Wrath would live, but none of them would.

I commanded more power, more fire, more fury as I turned my magic on the witches. There were two dozen. Other than Nonna, I immediately recognized none, though I wasn't truly looking. It wouldn't matter if I knew them personally or not. They'd come to fight, to kill, and I'd reply in kind. This time I would not allow anyone to get in between me and Wrath.

They'd hurt him, and even though he'd heal, I'd had enough.

I summoned every ounce of the fury I commanded, every bit of rage at the lies and the manipulation and the betrayal. Years of being kept from my magic unleashed in an inferno wholly controlled by me. One by one, the bodies collapsed, the charred ashes blowing away on the gusting winds. I rained fire down like a vengeful god, long after the last witch fell, content with watching the whole circle burn.

Warm fingers curled around mine, dragging me into the here and now.

The first thing I noticed was the eerie silence. Fire no longer crackled. The winter storm had also quieted. I barely even heard the demons beside me breathing.

I looked at Wrath, his expression tight but proud. "They're dead, my lady. All of them."

Prickles erupted along my body again. I tore my gaze from my husband's and glanced around. All the guards were looking at me with fear openly etched onto their faces.

Well, not *all* the guards. Plenty of demons dropped their gazes entirely, refusing to look me in the eye at all. I looked down the row of guards and soldiers until my attention rested on their prince. Greed wasn't afraid, but I sensed a bit of trepidation as he inclined his head. His hand still rested on the pummel of his sword.

"House Greed thanks House Wrath for its assistance."

Assistance. I'd ended a battle before any true war could begin. I looked at the uninjured guards—aside from the first guard who'd looked over the ledge, none had lost their lives. My fury hadn't receded enough, and between the needles of fear stabbing me and the

annoyance of male arrogance, I unleashed a bit more hell.

"Why is House Greed continually being targeted? I find it odd that both the witches and werewolves decided to attack your circle. No matter what match my sister keeps striking, they come to you. Not House Wrath or Envy or Pride. You. What have you done to make so many enemies?"

Greed lifted a shoulder. "Perhaps they're after my wealth. Coins from one gaming hall alone could help fund a war." He offered a bland smile. "Please see yourselves to your guest suite. I'd be remiss if I didn't throw a celebratory ball to honor you both."

With that, Greed and his guards marched back into the castle. I thought about tossing a few fire buds at their heels, the idea of watching them hop into the castle slightly amusing, but refrained. Wrath was still watching me as if I might lose control and burn the realm to the ground.

"I told you," I said quietly, "you have nothing to fear from me."

"I know that." Wrath's gaze shifted to the grounds. "But do you?"

I glanced over the parapet, staring down at the smoldering lawn, the bodies of our enemies were nothing more than a smudge of ash now.

It should disturb me, holding enough power to obliterate two dozen witches without breaking a sweat. Nonna might be down there among the dead. And yet I felt nothing. Except perhaps satisfaction that I'd protected the one I love. Which made me understand why my husband had been cautious with setting the vengeance goddess in me free.

I turned my attention back to Wrath. "I'd like to bathe off the scent of smoke before we dress for tonight."

Unsurprisingly, Greed's ballroom was bronzed decadence. As was true in his gaming halls, everything felt rich, luxurious, the best his coin could buy. Rich colors, an abundance of fine metals, silks and velvets, and an overwhelming amount of art showcased in gorgeous frames. It was a room meant to show the prince's greed for material riches.

Wrath and I casually strolled around the expansive dance floor. He hadn't said much when we'd bathed then changed into our formal attire, his mood nearly impossible to read.

But I wasn't a fool. I understood seeing me in all my glory, allowing my fury to run rampant, was troubling. But he knew what our strategy was; he'd helped to come up with it before we left House Wrath. Unlike his brother and Greed's army, Wrath hadn't been taken

by surprise this evening. He knew if I felt like either one of us were threatened, I would unleash my power without mercy. I vowed that no one would ever take us from each other again.

And I meant it.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder whether he'd regretted any part of our approach. If the general of war preferred to do battle in a more literal, hand-to-hand manner; my willingness to toss that civility aside and annihilate might have disturbed him.

Wrath had used his magic as an added weapon when we'd fought the wolves, but he'd used his dagger equally. A prickle of unease ran over me. It was impossible to tell if it was my mortal conscience resurfacing or if it was spikes of fear from nearby lords and ladies.

"Lady Emilia." A footman approached with glasses of sparkling wines in pale golds and pinks and plums to choose from. Gold flakes swirled within each glass, another form of greed. I chose a pale pink wine and sipped from it carefully. Wrath chose a plum-colored wine, and we continued our slow stroll around the ballroom.

Harder prickles ran along my arms with each group of lords and ladies we walked past. The bolder demons inclined their heads, muttering a polite, "Prince Wrath. Lady Emilia," before quickly finding somewhere else to be. Something unpleasant wedged itself under my ribs.

I didn't expect their thanks, but averted gazes and spikes of fear were a surprise. An unwelcome one. It was difficult to discern if their fear was directed entirely at me or if they were also wary of Wrath. The last time he was here, he did destroy a gaming hall with his legendary anger. Perhaps we were both targets of fear.

Though my husband had no difficulty drawing other males to his side. A few lords chatted politely about the battle that wasn't and took sips of their drinks, giving themselves a reason to rush off once Wrath reminded them how my fire magic saved them.

Wrath squeezed my hand gently. "Would you care to dance, my lady?"

"Yes."

My husband led us onto the dance floor; it was a lustrous bronze that reflected our images in a fuzzy, distorted manner. It matched how I felt internally: distorted and fuzzy. I was unused to trying to incorporate mortal emotions into my immortal sensibilities. It felt like two halves of me were trying to come together, but one half was oil and the other was water. No matter how hard I tried to blend them together, they remained separate, almost warring with each other.

Wrath held me indecently close as the musicians struck up a waltz, his hand sliding low enough on my back to cause a honeyed warmth to ignite in my veins. If he was attempting to distract me from

the needles of unease crossing the room, it was almost working.

Until I set my attention on the Duke of Devon and felt the heat of his anger. He promptly turned to the male he'd been dancing with and said something that made the demon chuckle. At my expense, most likely. Though I refused to allow that to sting. I, too, would have been upset if I'd been caught in Wrath's sinful storm with my cock out and ended up pissing myself.

Couples that had been seemingly unaware of anyone aside from each other stiffened as we passed. This time, I heard the whispers. They spoke of the rise of the Feared. How the goddess of death was wanted for murder and how Fury had come to settle my sister's debts. It wasn't my wrathful husband they were scared of—it was me.

I rested my head against Wrath's shoulder and ignored the murmurs. They could talk and gossip all they liked; none of them knew me or what I felt. How I wanted to help them all by finding the Blade of Ruination and breaking the curse. Even then, I imagined nothing I did would ever be good enough for some. They'd always find cause to hate or fear me if that was the path they chose to wander. The murmurs turned more pointed, crueler.

I held my head high as we continued to dance around the room. Soon the crowded dance floor was almost empty, and the prickles that indicated fear had turned to stabbing. I clamped my jaw together and kept my expression neutral. Perhaps it was the nearly twenty years of being mortal and living as a human, but I no longer wished to inspire such fear.

Power was one thing—I would not apologize for the ability to defend myself and those I loved, but this? This was not at all what I wanted. A memory of my old life came floating back. Despite the fiery magic I summoned, I'd been cold on the inside, alone except for my twin.

I'd forgotten how isolating it had been, being feared. I hadn't known anything else, had nothing to compare it with. Now I knew the warmth of friendship. The joy of laughter and the comfort in… acceptance.

Wrath was respected for his power, not punished for it. Demons and even his brothers thought twice before crossing him, yet they looked at me like I was an executioner ready to incinerate them for any perceived slight. It wasn't fair to be punished for the very same thing my husband was revered for. Though maybe from their perspective I was something that did inspire true fear. House Vengeance was not simply ruled by one sin like the other Houses. It could come for all, and that was something the demons feared.

"… she tricked him into marriage."

A couple shot me a nasty look, and I stiffened. That wasn't at all

what had happened.

"Ignore them." Wrath's voice was as smooth as silk in my ear. "You didn't trick me into anything. And you were magnificent today. You stopped a battle before it could start a war. Your magic brought peace. It was a necessary and strategic move. Never doubt that."

"That doesn't seem to be the consensus shared by this court," I said quietly. "I thought you might be questioning our tactics, too."

"I trust you, my lady. And I trusted your judgment out there today." He swept us across the dance floor, his touch grounding me. "The witches would not have fought a fair battle. They would have used more magic and trickery. In this instance, I stand behind our choice to fight as we did. You used your magic as a weapon today. It did not use you, Emilia. It was a true victory, and I'm proud of what you accomplished. None of these courtiers would stand up and fight for their own court."

"I acted mostly for my own benefit," I confessed. "I didn't want Greed to demand another blood retribution. And when they targeted you, I *wanted* to kill them all."

Wrath brought his lips to my ear, and I felt him smile. "Even more appealing, my lady."

"Liar." I gripped his hand in mine as we moved across the dance floor, thankful. I knew what he said was right, and yet with the ballroom full of fearful demons, it made me feel otherwise.

Obliterating an enemy by setting them ablaze didn't feel heroic. It felt callous. Or that's what I *would* have felt before the spell-lock was removed. Everything was confusing now, wrong. I was a goddess who shouldn't feel so deeply, who should act without judgment, but I knew one fact to be true: just because I had the power to do so didn't mean I should.

What sort of precedence would that set for the subjects of the realm? We were all trapped in an endless cycle of wrong acts. Sursea using us. Vittoria and I tricking Wrath and Pride. The witches binding us. Me and Vittoria striking back at them. Their attacking House Greed. This unrest between all of us could go on for eternity if we didn't put an end to it. Someone needed to stand up and say enough. That might wasn't always right. Otherwise, the next powerful creature could emerge and do whatever they saw fit to anyone less powerful.

"A kiss for your thoughts?" Wrath asked. Smiling at the unexpected request, I lifted my face, allowing our lips to brush against each other. "Now tell me."

"I don't feel as I used to." My admission was whispered so only the demon prince could hear me. "I'm happy to have my full power back, my memories. But… inspiring such fear, it's not what I desire. I don't want to walk into a room and have it go silent. Watchful. I don't

want to feel that level of fear directed my way. I'd forgotten how lonely I'd been before I met you. How cold it had made me, bringing fear and chaos with me in place of warmth and love."

Wrath was quiet for a moment. "What do you want?"

I thought about the prophecy, and while it might not have been solely about us, I felt one aspect of it acutely. *As above, so below.* Balance. Now that I was fairly confident Vesta was alive and hiding of her own accord, I had a new goal to focus on entirely.

"I want to right this wrong. I don't just want to break the curse, I want to give all of us a true chance at coexisting peacefully."

"Peace might not be possible."

"I know. But I want to at least do something right. There's been too much anger and resentment. I want to wake up and not worry about who might attack that day. Out of jealousy, or anger, or greed—I want to focus on the good. I want to surround myself with love. And that will never be possible if we're all cursed." I took a deep breath and exhaled. "I want to go to the Well of Memory. And I want to end this endless cycle tonight."

Wrath leaned forward and pressed a chaste kiss to my lips. "Hold on tight, my lady."

Without saying good-bye to his brother or any member of Greed's court, Wrath magicked us away in the middle of the dance floor, earning a few shouted curses we both ignored.

TWENTY-ONE

*"**You must pay** the goddess a tithe to enter the Well of Memory's chamber."* I recited Fauna's earlier instruction as I studied the statue of the goddess and serpent in Wrath's gardens.

There were no features carved onto her face, but she had flowers in her hair, much like how I used to wear mine. Her curved blades looked sharp enough to draw blood, so I climbed up on the edge of the pool and pressed my fingertip on one. A single drop of blood welled up before the wound healed, leaving no indication it had just been injured. It was now odd to recall this immediate healing ability hadn't been the case just two evenings ago. The spell-lock had well and truly changed me. But I would not dwell on that now.

I surveyed the statue for any hint of a change from the blood offering. None occurred. It would have been far too convenient for the statue to magically come to life and reveal that the curved dagger in its fist was the missing Blade of Ruination. But it certainly would have been nice. Wrath had warned me before I left that the statue wasn't hiding the legendary blade to his knowledge. Part of me had believed my goddess blood would unlock some spell on the statue that even the demons hadn't known about. Alas, that wasn't the case.

I held my hand over the still water of the reflecting pool, watching as the solitary drop of blood fell into it. In theory, the blood drop should have dispersed once it joined the rest of the water, but there was magic at play. The single drop of blood expanded and grew. It cycled around the pool, spiraling tighter together as it wound its way toward the center.

Ruby-colored stairs formed within the spiral, disappearing into a yawning darkness that dropped below ground level. Just as Wrath had explained would happen. He couldn't come with me—this was

something I needed to do on my own—but that hadn't stopped him from divulging everything he knew, like a general preparing a solider for battle.

I gathered my skirts with one hand and stepped onto the crimson stairs. I followed them without fear as I traveled underground. No water from the reflecting pool touched me; it parted with each step I took deeper into the earth. Once I'd fully submerged myself, leaving the cool winter night behind, I descended for a few minutes, the air turning crisper the farther down I went. The temperature didn't bother me as it once would have. It wasn't comfortable, but I did not experience any teeth-chattering or rising goose bumps along my flesh.

There was no light, only endless dark that seemed to get thicker, more pervasive with each meter I traveled. But, with my immortal body and senses, I could see almost as clearly as if it were a sunny afternoon near the shore. After a few minutes of moving at a brisk speed, the stairs abruptly ended. I stood on rocky soil and glanced around the small cavern.

A shaft of unnatural bluish light illuminated a well made of what appeared to be bricks of rose quartz that sat just off center from the base of the stairs. The Well of Memory. I moved closer, noting arcane symbols and Latin had been carved into some gemstones on its edge. I ran a finger over the indentations, feeling the power contained within the well hum against my skin.

I peered into the magical well; the water was crystal clear, showing off what had to be thousands of crystals all along its bottom. Each gemstone represented a memory or a nightmare. Something terrible enough that whoever had let the memory go would not miss it.

I wondered if Wrath had come to find a memory or to lose one. It wasn't important. The only thing that mattered now was finding out as much as possible about this blade that, according to Fauna's research, could end my husband's curse. I could not lose sight of that, or I had no hope of succeeding.

I climbed over the small wall and submerged myself in the water, ignoring the slight nip of coldness that seeped into my clothing. "Where is the Blade of Ruination?"

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the well, allowing my mind to focus solely on the answer I was searching for. My fingers skimmed over several crystals before I paused on one that felt slightly warmer. Fauna hadn't mentioned anything like that, but maybe it was a positive sign that I'd attracted the correct memory. There was only one way to find out. My fingers closed around the crystal, and I drew the memory into me, taking it on as if it were mine.

Fear clawed at the young wolf, tearing screams from its already torn-apart throat. It was just a pup, but it sensed the dark magic of the man. Demon. His cruel slash of a mouth pressed into a thin line when his coin-colored gaze drifted back to her. She'd heard him enter their home, heard the hushed words he'd spoken with her papa, and immediately shifted. Something her papa told her wasn't supposed to be possible. And a mistake she'd immediately regretted once the demon had scruffed her up by the neck and held her up.

"This is your firstborn? The hybrid warrior?"

His tone hinted at disbelief. The pup growled, baring her small canines.

Papa's eyes widened. "Yes, your highness. Her very name means 'dedicated to Mars,' the god of war, as you—"

"I care nothing for mortal gods. She will be given a proper demon name once we're back in my court."

The pup wriggled in the stranger's grip, panicked. She didn't know what court was and didn't wish to find out. Papa's throat bobbed; the wolf pup pleaded wordlessly for him to take her back, take her from this stranger's grip. Her mother, the woman who never loved her for some reason, had already gone to bed. If Papa didn't save her, no one would.

"Your highness"—*Papa squared his shoulders, and hope surged in the young pup*—"perhaps there is something else I can give you to clear my debt. She is but a pup. Scraggly and unremarkable. Let me raise enough coin instead. Or perhaps… perhaps I will succeed in finding the Blade of Ruination."

"You haven't found the blade yet and likely never will." *The stranger held the pup up to his face again, inspecting her closely.* "She shifted, about twenty years early, according to your own history. That seems fairly remarkable to me. And what of her demon abilities? What sort of magic does she possess on that end?"

"I… I'm unsure, your highness."

The demon narrowed his eyes. "Lie to me again and I will remove that troublesome tongue."

"Please." *Papa's voice was barely a whisper, a broken plea spoken from a broken man. Even though she'd been warned not to, the wolf pup used a bit of her magic to soothe him.* "Please, your highness. Ask me for anything else. Please don't take my daughter."

"How does your wife feel, raising the by-blow of a demon you bedded?"

"She will grow to love the child. My daughter shouldn't pay the price for my sins. Please. Please strike another bargain."

The demon's mouth pressed into a displeased line as her baby brother cried out from his crib. "Has your son shifted early, too?"

Papa glanced at the cradle, swallowing hard. "No, your highness. He shows no signs of shifting early."

"Then our business concludes here. Hand over your daughter and stand down."

The stranger jerked his chin, and a man with deer fur and liquid brown eyes stepped from the shadows. The pup whined as the monster—demon—reached out and took her. Her whines turned to shrieks as he shoved her into a sack and cinched it closed. Through her earsplitting howls, she heard the stranger say, "You were foolish enough to bargain with House Greed. I suggest you think about the consequences the next time you gamble something so valuable away."

Tears streamed down my face, and I gritted my teeth against the mournful howls I still heard as the young wolf had been taken from her family. I felt the sorrow, the despair, the terror she'd experienced, but there was nothing I could do to help that pup. I desperately searched for a clue from the memory to guide me to her, to seek her out once I'd accomplished my task here.

The father seemed almost familiar, but his features had been obscured by both the darkness of the room and the tears of the wolf pup. I was almost certain his accent had been from my version of the Shifting Isles, but there was nothing to indicate how long ago that memory had been purged. It could have been months, or decades. Perhaps even a hundred years. Still, I felt helpless. And I hated Greed a little more.

How he could have taken someone's child, no matter what they'd gambled…

"A hybrid child." The result of a wolf mating with a demon. Just as I suspected Vesta had been. If she still lived—as I believed she did—then this memory proved the court rumors the duke had shared were correct—Vesta had to have been unhappy.

If she recalled any time with her true family, being torn away from them… it would have been hell, living with her captor. Serving as his commander. I prayed that she had escaped him, that my sister had aided her in some way.

I wanted to tear out of this well and pay House Greed a visit to exact some vengeance for the wolf pup, but I had to focus solely on my question. A feat more difficult than I'd imagined, given the rage searing through my veins. "Where is the Blade of Ruination?"

I tossed the wolf pup's memory stone aside and wrapped my fingers around another, immediately getting sucked into a new memory…

Sursea heard the king approach his throne room, his footsteps as loud as thunder. He was in a foul mood, and it was growing darker the closer he got to her. Good. It was time he paid attention to her request, took it

seriously. All he had to do was demand Pride give up her daughter, forbid them from marrying. Surely he had the power to stop such an unholy union.

If he wanted Sursea out of this realm for good, this arrangement would suit them both. All she had to do was ignite his hatred until it matched her own. She'd considered bringing her notorious hexed blade if he refused, but she needed him alive. For now.

The devil flung open the double doors, and Sursea felt the heat of his glorious wings on full display. She didn't glance up, refusing to give him the satisfaction of staring at his wings like so many others had. She'd seen them before, when he'd banished the vampires to the southern court, bypassing the mountains that belonged to the goddesses as if they were cursed. His wings were silver-tipped white flame, lethal, beautiful. And his most prized weapons, according to her spies. There was nothing he cared for more.

A general of war would surely do a great many things to retain such a prize.

Refusing to look in his direction, she caressed the bare skin along her outer thighs. She knew he would not be aroused; her act was not meant to seduce as much as to infuriate.

"Get out." *His voice was harsh, brutal. It irked her greatly, though it had been what she wanted.*

Sursea's attention cut to his. "Talking with you hasn't worked. Nor logic and reasoning. Now I have a rather tempting new offer for you." *Over the thin material of her gown, she slowly skimmed the peaks of her breasts. The demon didn't so much as glance down, but his namesake sin did chill the room.* "Take off your pants."

He crossed his arms, his expression forbidding. A flicker of rage ignited in those gold eyes of his. "Get out," *he repeated.* "Leave before I *force* you."

"Try." *In one inhumanly graceful movement, she swung herself into a standing position, her long silver dress gleaming like a sword carving through the heavens. It was time for their true battle to begin. He was riled up nicely, and there was one thing she knew—a temper could get the best of anyone, including the demon who ruled over wrath.* "Touch me, and I will destroy all you hold dear. Your majesty."

Sursea's tone had turned mocking, meant to needle him further.

He laughed then, the sound as menacing as the dagger now pressed against her throat.

"You seem to be mistaken," *he all but growled,* "there is nothing I hold dear. I want you out of this realm before nightfall. If you're not gone by then, I'll set my hellhounds loose. When they're finished, whatever's left will be tossed in the Lake of Fire."

She'd been around princes of Hell long enough to know he was waiting

to scent her fear. When he didn't sense any, he'd grow suspicious, and she needed to retain the upper hand. She jerked forward and slashed her throat across the blade in one brutal motion. Blood spilled over her shimmering gown, splattered across the smooth marble floor, dirtied his cuffs. She knew that *would be the final insult.*

Unfazed by her new vicious necklace, she stepped away from him, her smile more wicked than the worst of the devil's brothers. She would know. With the exception of Pride, she'd tried to seduce them all to no avail. For a group of scheming, selfish demons, they certainly protected one another when matters of the heart were concerned. The wound stitched itself together under his cold, watchful gaze.

"Are you certain about that? There isn't *anything* you yearn for?" *When he didn't respond, her annoyance flared. She was tired of being denied such a simple request. They didn't trust witches any more than witches trusted demons. Having her daughter banished would be best for all. There was no possibility that they would want a witch to corule over one of their precious Houses.* "Maybe the rumors are true, after all. You have no heart in that armored chest of yours." *She circled him, her skirts smearing a trail of blood across the once pristine floor.* "Perhaps we should carve you open, take a look."

She allowed her attention to pause on the unusual silver and white wings of flame at his back, her grin turning feral. She'd allowed just enough time for his brow to crease. Then she struck. With one quick snap of her fingers, his mighty weapons turned the color of ash, then disappeared.

Sursea watched with satisfaction as panic seized him. A rare showing of emotion from a demon known for his cool temperament. He repeatedly tried—and failed—to summon the wings.

"Here is a trick as nasty as the devil himself." *Her voice was both young and old as she spoke her spell into existence. He swore impressively.* "From this day forward, a curse will sweep through this land. You will forget all but your hate. Love, kindness, every good thing in your world will cease. One day that will change. When you know true happiness, I vow to take whatever you love, too."

Sursea watched as he strained to summon his wings to no avail, hoping he'd want them desperately enough to do as she'd asked, especially with a curse on him now. All she wanted was to free her daughter from the philandering drunkard. To ensure her true happiness. And to keep her safe from this miserable realm. Sursea had stood by and watched her daughter's light dim for far too long. Pride only cared for himself, was incapable of dedicating himself to one lover. Something that would be fine if her daughter was of the same temperament.

Sursea clicked her tongue once, disappointed the king didn't release his inner monster to fight back, and started to turn away. Instead of chasing

her, he spoke in a voice assassins used before they slit someone's throat in the night. "You're wrong."

Sursea paused, tossing a glance over a shoulder. Not many dared to call her wrong. Especially after refusing to grant her a favor. She was a powerful ally and an even worse enemy. "Oh?"

"The devil may be nasty, but he doesn't perform tricks." *His smile was slow, taunting.* "He bargains." *Sursea watched him closely, feeling her magic stirring at the quiet threat he posed. The air between them was charged with hatred. He would kill her without thought if she didn't possess something he wanted desperately.* "Care to strike a deal?"

Originally, she had wanted a deal. Seeing him now without his wings, though, it filled her with a dark sense of glee. She hated Pride. Hated the princes of Hell. And exacting a little bit of revenge felt more satisfying than she'd imagined. Still, it would be remiss of her to not hear him out. Her daughter's happiness was what truly mattered. She ran her attention over him.

"Pretend I'm entertaining the idea of a bargain, one small opportunity for you to break the curse and earn your wings back. What are your terms?" *Sursea asked.*

"Six years, six months, and six days." *The king of demons' voice was low, dangerous. He'd not hesitated with his response, which indicated he'd thought it through before offering. Not that she expected anything less from the battle strategist. Before she could agree or inquire further, he added,* "Time will be measured in the Seven Circles. Not any other hell dimension. During that period, you will not set foot in mine or any of my brothers' Houses of Sin unless invited. If you do, then you risk a curse of your own. One I shall not reveal until it's too late."

Sursea eyed the devil speculatively. The bargain was relatively simple enough, but she recognized the dark gleam in his eyes. Knew the deceptiveness it hinted at. Wrath was no fool. And neither was she. There was great risk by agreeing to it, but the potential for an even greater reward was too tempting to pass up. "I want a guarantee that no one associated with you or your brothers will try to make an attempt on my life or cause me harm in any way. And if you cannot break the curse within that time, it shall *never* be undone. No magic, no trickery, no bargain will matter. For all eternity, you shall never have what you love most."

"When I do break it, and when I decide I no longer wish to have you taint this realm, you will be banished from the Seven Circles. And you must erase the memory of this conversation."

Sursea considered all angles. It didn't so much matter if he won, as long as she *got what she'd been after all along. Six years, six months, and six days ought to grant her enough time to see her plan through. Though in other realms it could be closer to twenty years. Regardless of how much*

time she needed to endure, if she never had the misfortune of dealing with princes of Hell again, it was a small price to pay for eternity.

She didn't need to remember this conversation in its entirety, she only needed to recall her goal of protecting her daughter. An idea was stirring. She'd heard rumors the Crone had been using magic to shape the memories of anyone who tried to cross a particular mountain range to the south. But her interference was only directed at one particular, enigmatic House of Sin that stood apart from all others. It wasn't ruled by demons, but something much worse. And it was the one stipulation the king of demons forgot to include in his bargain.

Perhaps it was time to pay House Vengeance a visit.

"What of the Shifting Isles?" *she asked.* "They technically are their own dimension."

The king seemed to consider this. She'd heard rumors that he disliked the isles but wanted confirmation. "If you'd like to be banished there, in true Hell, be my guest."

"You know," *she made her tone sound bored,* "some believe six-six-six to be the sign of the beast. If I purge this memory, how am I to trust you won't break your word?"

"You know full well it symbolizes balance. Natural order. Don't feign ignorance, Sursea. I can scent your lies, and they reek of shit." *He called for a servant, then pulled a clear, smooth piece of quartz from inside his jacket pocket. Sursea did her best to not look surprised. The devil had come prepared to do battle. A moment later, that same servant reappeared with a contract and two blood quills. Unease trailed a finger along her spine as the king handed her the stone.* "Purge the memory and we'll sign the oath."

The memory abruptly ended, and I was thrust back into the here and now. My clothes were soaked through, the water frigid. Yet I was consumed with an inner fire that had the air glimmering from the sudden heat. I glanced at my hand, at the pulverized crystal in it. The memory hadn't stopped, *I'd* crushed it in my fist.

Six years, six months, and six days. Wrath never mentioned a clock counting down our time to break the curse. But he had wanted me to swear a blood oath to him, for six months. And then Anir had also mentioned his having six months left to regain his full power. Then, of course, there was Sursea's snide comment about time moving quickly in the throne room.

I swore, using every foul word and phrase I knew. Given Sursea's glee, we probably didn't have much time left.

I wanted to charge up to the castle and demand to know how long we had left, but that had to wait. I still hadn't found what I'd been looking for. And now, more than ever, I needed to discover where the

Blade of Ruination was so I could break the curse before it was too late.

"Where is the Blade of Ruination?" I concentrated on my question, fueled it with *my* fury and my magic, and shoved my hand below water again. I grabbed a fistful of crystals, and each one that tried to suck me into a nightmare was crushed to nothingness. I had neither the time nor the patience to deal with anyone else's fear. I *was* fear. And I was capable of being a nightmare. The Well of Memory vibrated as if it trembled from the surge of my raw emotions. "Show me who last saw the Blade of Ruination. Now."

My fingers closed on a roughened crystal that drew blood. A hiss of pain escaped my lips right before I was dragged into the next memory.

As the scene sprang into place, I swallowed my surprise. It seemed the secrets the people in my life had been keeping hadn't been completely revealed.

Until now.

TWENTY-TWO

"**Demons are not** capable of love. I've told you that countless times."

Her mother's superior tone grated on Lucia. She'd been scheming for years to put an end to Lucia's relationship and didn't hide the fact she was thrilled by recent events. Lucia wished to curl into a ball on her side and weep, but she refused to prove her mother correct.

Mother had said the Prince of Pride was the worst rake of the seven princes of Hell. That he'd fallen into infatuation time and again, always leaving broken hearts in his wake. And it would be no different when his attention finally wandered from her, an immortal witch he had no business consorting with. And not simply any *witch, as her mother often reminded her, but the eldest daughter of the First Witch, the all-powerful, sun goddess–descended Sursea.*

For years her mother chided her over how Lucia ought to have taken more care to set a better example. To not be deemed a fool in front of other witches who looked to her for instruction on how to carry themselves around the denizens of the Seven Circles. Courting—and worse yet, marrying—a demon was the worst sort of example, especially one as notorious as Pride.

Lucia wasn't naive enough to think Pride would change, nor did she wish for him to do so for her benefit, but nothing prepared her for the pain of watching him fall under another's spell. His actions weren't done out of malice; Lucia believed that with each piece of her *broken heart. She'd seen his kindness, knew his affection for her wasn't feigned. Her mother thought her a fool, but she'd heard the rumors well before she agreed to his courtship. Knew he might be infatuated today, but tomorrow was an unknown. He needed attention and adoration the way flowers needed sunshine and rain to bloom. She'd found his whims terribly exciting, never falling into predictability or routine. Being a guardian between realms,*

she'd had plenty of routine and hated the monotony of it.

When they'd first met, the charming prince had been taken with her name. Lucia was derived from lux, *the Latin word for light. Pride, Lucifer, was the Morningstar. The light bringer. He'd called it star-crossed fate, claiming they were from two opposing sides meant to hate each other, but instead were unable to deny their fated love. Lucia didn't believe in fate, but she rather enjoyed bantering with him. His nose would crinkle in the most adorable way when she good-naturedly rankled him. For his part, Pride seemed to adore her for it.*

It had all seemed wildly romantic at first. Capturing the attention of someone like that. Someone who she never should have spoken to, let alone fallen for. Pride had been correct on one account. Their love was forbidden. And like all things forbidden, it held greater appeal. A sense of danger hung over them whenever they sneaked off for one of their clandestine meetings. At any moment they might be discovered, might cause a scandal for witches and demons alike.

As a Star Witch, the first of her kind, Lucia was meant to guard the realm, to ensure the demon princes behaved. Her sole duty was to make sure they remained in the Seven Circles, playing their sin-fueled games with their wicked courts and left the mortals in peace. Then she met him. *Like the morning star he was, Pride came blazing into her life, igniting her passions and waking her up from a mundane, duty-filled existence that paled in comparison.*

Even when he'd asked for her hand, she knew it wasn't always going to be as it was then. He burned too brightly, too powerfully for his fires to ever be contained. Truth be told, she wouldn't ever want him to change. But she'd come to realize that she *had. And that was the issue. Her discontentment began small as most troubles often do, a tiny seed that grew into something more over time. She wanted something Pride never could give or even be. At least, not with her. And that was the root of her heartache.*

Pride had always remained true to himself; it was Lucia who hadn't been honest with herself or with him about her desires. He'd called her on her lies, begged her to tell him the truth, but she'd refused.

In fact, they'd argued that very night. Pride asked her again and again to confide in him, to tell him why she was upset. He vowed to do anything to make her happy. He promised to miss the feast, to stay by her side, to work through whatever was troubling her. But Lucia believed happiness couldn't come from another, it had to be found within first.

She knew Pride would do anything for her; he'd never speak to another in any romantic way. And eventually, he'd be as unhappy as she was now. No matter how much love there was between them, Lucia realized some people just weren't meant to be.

Tears burned behind her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Her

mother watched her closely, disapproval written all over her immortal face.

"His first and only love is himself. That is the nature of his sin. Leaving was for the best, Lucia. In time you'll not only believe it, but feel it to be true."

"Of course it was."

Mother spoke as if Lucia hadn't been the one to choose to walk away. It hurt, beyond anything she'd experienced before, but she'd done it. While Pride openly courted Nicoletta of House Vengeance at the feast tonight, Lucia had feigned a headache and remained at House Pride. Once her husband had finally given in to her demands and left, she grabbed the trunk she'd packed earlier and raced to the portal on their lands.

Mother had been staying on the Shifting Isles, so before she could convince herself it was a bad idea, Lucia pictured her mother's home—the charming cottage with a thatched roof that sat high on the bluffs in the isle's version of Ireland—and stepped into the portal.

Now, as she sat primly at the small dining room table, sipping a cup of herbal tea, she half-regretted her destination. Part of her wondered if her own pride was clouding her judgment.

Perhaps she should *have found the courage to tell her husband every fear or worry of her heart. This doubt wasn't for long, she reminded herself as she gathered up her courage to ask what she'd come here for. Mother would hopefully give her anything to ensure she didn't return to the Seven Circles.*

"I want to forget." *Lucia held her mother's gaze.* "I know you have a spell from the Crone. I want it. And I want to be left alone until I'm ready to come back. *If* I'm ever ready."

Her mother, to her credit, didn't so much as bat an eye. "Where do you wish to go?"

Lucia let out a breath, thankful there would be no fight or argument. She'd given much thought to where she'd love to be, where her heart could mend and she could live the sort of life she desired. "Sicily."

Mother's expression turned calculating. Lucia knew it meant she was privately scheming and didn't care. So long as Lucia got what she wanted, her mother could play out whatever game she wished. Mother stood and retrieved a small satchel from a hidden panel in the wall. She placed it in front of Lucia and tapped the buckle that held it together. "This package contains all you need to forget. Not just your heartache, but whatever you wish to leave behind."

"And you just happened to have this lying around?"

"I've been prepared for this day since you first laid eyes on that demon and he sank his claws into your precious heart."

Knowing the conversation would go nowhere, Lucia unlocked the leather strap and pulled the satchel open, surveying the strange assortment of items. A rough, rare piece of blue quartz from the Southern Hemisphere.

Rolled-up parchment—with a spell for forgetting. And a dagger. One Lucia recognized at once.

It was legendary, an object hexed by her mother that could kill any creature, even a prince of Hell. The dagger was also rumored to break curses, but Lucia knew a secret about it that no one else did, save her mother. A secret that would either activate the blade or see it destroyed forever if done incorrectly.

"The Blade of Ruination? What will I need this for?"

"Silly, child." *Her mother tsked.* "Protection. Do you think his pride will allow him to sit idly by as his wife makes a fool of him? Do you not think he'll seek revenge?"

"He would never harm me or wish me ill." *Lucia stared at her mother in horror.* "Do you truly think so little of him, even after all these years?"

"He might not cause you harm, Lucia, but I doubt he'll let his wife vanish without searching for her. Did you leave a letter of explanation? Does he know you're not coming back?"

Lucia's eyes fluttered shut as shame pinked her cheeks. She'd tried to. She'd sat at her writing desk, ink pot ready, quill in hand, and couldn't find the right words. Any words. It had been cowardly. Cruel, even. But instead of saying the wrong thing or writing all of her wants and worries and fears out for him to ultimately reject her, she simply left.

"One day he will find you." *Her mother's tone was as steely as her expression.* "He will remember all you do not. And I promise he will stop at nothing to win you back. His pride will see to that. Only you'll be at a disadvantage, having forgotten him. Do you think he'll be a devoted husband after that? You'll have shamed him, bruised his legendary ego openly in front of his whole court. In front of the whole realm. And you won't even remember."

Lucia shook her head. She knew what her mother wasn't saying—she disapproved of Lucia taking a tonic to forget. It wasn't a smart battle tactic, and Mother considered witches and demons to constantly be at war. But the pain in Lucia's chest, the acute, all-consuming grief, was too great to overcome; she couldn't walk away from Pride if she remembered him. "I'll take the dagger. Just see to it I never fall for another prince of Hell again."

Mother's gaze turned hard, like the hell-forged steel in Lucia's hand. "When I'm through with the demons, I'll make sure no witch ever falls for their lies. And they will hate us in return, so passionately they wouldn't deign to fall in love with a witch again. That I vow on my life's blood, daughter." *She whispered a summoning spell, and within moments another witch appeared. Lucia vaguely recognized her from one of the more powerful covens.* "Maria, I have an assignment for you. You're living in the Shifting Isles' version of Palermo, correct?"

While Mother plotted with Maria, Lucia read over the spell. It was nothing more than an herbal tea blend, really. It would be easy to make. Even when she forgot why she was making it, she'd be able to pull the ingredients together. As she set the spell aside and picked up the roughened crystal, a steaming mug appeared before her. She glanced up, meeting the other witch's kind eyes.

"Drink. It will help ease the pain, bambina."

Lucia knew it was the first dose of the spelled tea. Knew that once she brought the porcelain to her lips, things would truly be over between her and Pride. Her mother didn't speak, but Lucia felt her attention shift to her, almost in challenge. Lucia picked up the cup, pausing before she took that fateful first sip that would signal both the end and a new beginning for her.

"I want a new name. A new family. I want to forget everything except that I am a witch." *Lucia finally brought her focus to her mother's.* "And I do not wish to see you until I ask for you."

There was a flash of what looked to be hurt in her mother's face, there and gone in an instant. "Very well. Maria will monitor the situation from afar and will set you up with a family in a dark coven."

The other witch nodded. "You'll be well cared for."

"Good." *Lucia nodded back—a quick jerk of her chin, then gulped the tea down in one, scalding shot. It took a few moments, but the heavy pressure on her chest lessened. Her muscles loosened. The sadness and despair lightened. If there had been something troubling her a moment ago, Lucia couldn't recall what it was. Perhaps it had been a bad dream. She blinked at the crystal in her hand and the dagger on the table before her, her brow creasing.* "What are these for?"

Maria gave her a sad smile. "You must never show this dagger to anyone. Never speak of it. It's only to be used on the Wicked."

"The Wicked?" *Lucia's heart pounded furiously. If she didn't know any better, she'd think someone was manipulating her emotions. But that sort of power was supposed to be forbidden.* "Who are they?"

An unfamiliar witch with strange starlight eyes slowly moved around the small wooden table. Power radiated off her, and Lucia fought a shudder. "The Wicked are bloodthirsty creatures known as princes of Hell. They seek to destroy you. To destroy all witches."

"If you see one," *Maria added,* "you must hide. And if they come for you…"

Lucia glanced down at the deadly-looking blade. "I must protect myself." *She inhaled deeply, feeling the truth settle inside her. The Wicked. Her mortal enemies. She prayed to the goddess she'd never encounter one but was thankful for the dagger just in case. Lucia picked up the rare blue crystal.* "Is this a memory stone?"

The witch with starlight eyes nodded. "For your safety, you must purge your memories of this night now. I'll give you a sleeping

draught, and when you awake, Maria will have taken you home."

"Am I in danger?" *Lucia asked the witch, hating the edge of fear in her voice.*

"Not anymore."

As Lucia held the magic crystal and started feeding her memories of the night to it, the stone took something she couldn't recall if she wanted to lose or not. She drew her brows together again as the stone heated up, taking more and more of her thoughts from the last few hours. "Who… what is my name?"

Starlight eyes didn't seem to think her lack of memory in that area was a surprise, which indicated she had wanted it gone. At least, that's what the witch without a name thought. "Your name is Claudia. You're from Palermo. You're a powerful witch with an affinity for dark magic and have been blessed with Sight. You are talented with a blade and aren't squeamish around the dead. And your family is waiting for your arrival."

Claudia. She nodded; the name seemed to fit. Though the rest of the story didn't ring as true. Claudia noticed the witch hadn't said her family was waiting for her return. *Only her arrival. Claudia didn't remember taking the sleeping draught, but her lids suddenly felt too heavy to keep open. She managed to ask one more question before sleep claimed her.* "Who are you?"

"A powerful ally to some. A nightmare to others."

As Claudia drifted off to a troubled sleep, she prayed to never see the witch with strange eyes again.

TWENTY-THREE

Back in the Well of Memory, I stared at the roughened crystal in my palm. For the first time since I'd become immortal again, I swore I felt the phantom beating of a human heart I no longer possessed. I couldn't believe it. I'd found what I'd been searching for, but collecting the blade would not be easy. Claudia, my dearest friend, was the First Witch's daughter. Lucia. Pride's missing wife who was presumed dead, even by Wrath. And Claudia did not remember any of it.

Unlike me, she'd *chosen* to forget her prince. A decision that tore her apart, but she'd found the strength to do it. Because she'd felt it was best for her. *Blood and bones.* I didn't want to be the monster who made her recall her heartache, and I had no desire to lead any of the demon princes to my friend after she'd successfully disappeared. It was a miracle none of them had encountered her while they'd been on our version of the Shifting Isles.

Claudia clearly didn't want to be found, especially by her husband, and she'd moved on. She was happy, content with the new life she'd carved out for herself.

But my choices were limited. Claudia had the Blade of Ruination, the only weapon capable of severing the curse, and hidden in her mind was a secret about how to get the dagger to work without destroying it. I carefully replayed that part of her memory in my mind, desperate for any other way to get the information and leave my friend to the peace she'd found.

The dagger was also rumored to break curses, but Lucia knew a secret about it that no one else did, save her mother. A secret that would either activate the blade or see it destroyed forever if done incorrectly.

I had little doubt my friend would hand over the dagger if I asked

for it, but for me to use it properly, Claudia needed her memory back. I wasn't sure if there was a limit to how many times one could purge a memory. If she took the memory of that night back now, she might never be rid of it again. In our realm it had been nearly two decades of forgetting, of moving on for her. And I saw no other avenue to take to avoid causing her pain. It was a terrible price to ask of someone else, and I'd do anything to pay the cost myself.

"Divine goddess above. There has to be…"

Lucia knew a secret about it that no one else did, save her mother.

"Blessed be the wicked."

My lips curved. The devil truly was in the details as humans liked to say. Wrath, the king of even the most minute of details, would be pleased his reputation preceded him. There was one other person who knew the blade's secret. One I did not mind hurting to get information from.

If anything, I was eager to offer revenge for my husband and my friend. I carefully placed the memory stone in my bodice and headed for the dungeon. It was time to thaw out Sursea and see what interesting things she had to say about the Blade of Ruination.

By blood and by pain, or of her own free will, she'd tell me what I wished to know.

Burning wildflowers floated above the frozen statue that was Sursea, the heat of my magic warming the otherwise frigid room. I sat on a stool a guard had brought in and watched impassively as ice melted and dripped onto the stone floor.

Thawing her was a tedious process that was taking longer than I'd anticipated, but it had to be done properly or she could revive "wrong," according to my husband.

I normally wouldn't care about any ill effects she'd suffer, but I needed her to tell me how to activate the blade, and I wouldn't risk any chance of losing that opportunity for petty vengeance. My sister would roll her eyes if she saw me now, but this was how I hoped our House of Sin would handle such matters once reestablished.

Wrath stepped into the small subterranean chamber and pressed his lips together at the sight of Sursea. His hatred for the witch was palpable. If she weren't immortal and if he didn't want his wings back, he'd have killed her long ago. The temperature dropped a few degrees, which would not do the thawing process any favors.

"Once she's thawed enough to speak, is there a certain amount of time I should aim to complete the interrogation by?" I asked,

successfully dragging Wrath's attention away from the dark place he'd been descending to. The temperature returned to the normal chill that nipped at the air this far below ground.

"Take all the time you need. Once you're done questioning her, send for me. She's not to be left alone until she's frozen again."

I gave my husband a quick smile. When I told him what I needed, he didn't hesitate to make it happen. Even when I'd asked him not to be present or ask questions. Now that I could also sense emotions, I knew with certainty he'd not experienced even a moment of doubt or hesitation. "Thank you for trusting me."

"Try not to maim her too terribly." He kissed my forehead and headed for the door.

Anir skidded to a halt outside the dungeon and nodded at me before following Wrath from the room, their heads bent in hushed conversation. The other Houses of Sin were still on high alert after the failed attempt to attack House Greed. With the constant correspondence coming in and interruptions of emissaries and war room debates, I hadn't yet asked Wrath about how much time was left to break the curse. Not that I'd had more than two minutes with him since my return from the Well of Memory. I'd rushed here immediately following my request.

In case something went wrong with my questioning of Sursea, I didn't want to get his hopes up and tell him what I'd learned. But we needed to speak. Soon.

That is, if the stubborn witch thawed in this century. I swore she was taking her time, twisting the blade any chance she got. My fingers strummed against my forearms. Water slowly dribbled from the thick wall of ice surrounding Sursea. *Drip. Drip. Drip.*

I added one more burning flower to the flaming bouquet above her, then turned my attention back on Sursea's face, taking the time to truly look her over. The resemblance between her and Claudia wasn't overwhelming, but it was there once you knew to look for it. They had the same shape to their faces, and arch of their brows. Sursea's dark hair had waves and Claudia's had a bit more curl, but it was the same shade of luxurious brown.

With my own memories intact again, I knew I had never met Claudia when she was still Lucia and I was Fury. Seeing that revelation in the Well of Memory had been a shock.

I casted my mind back to the time before I was spell-locked, to remember what I could. From the beginning of our scheme, Vittoria and I never showed up to the same party while playing our role of "Nicoletta." She attended any meetings or parties with Pride, and I did the same with Wrath. Sursea insisted that we couldn't be caught until the time was right, as she wanted to ensure both princes had time to

truly fall in love.

Through all the parties and events, I couldn't recall Claudia at any function *I'd* attended. Still, I dove deeper into my memories. I recalled that Vittoria and I would take turns ruling our House of Sin every other week to allow Pride and Wrath to question the whereabouts of our combined persona—Nicoletta—when we weren't with them. Of course, we'd told them the truth in part. We were returning to House Vengeance, a House they knew little about, thanks to our mother's magic and our secrecy.

I recalled how we took care of every detail, just as Sursea asked—we even timed our visits to the Houses, to convince the princes there was adequate time for "Nicoletta" to have visited the other prince during the time she wasn't with one, driving a wedge between brothers as it was revealed they were courting the same woman.

The only event that Vittoria and I both attended was the fateful night that the First Witch asked us to make our pivotal move—the night of the Feast of the Wolf. That evening, on the one night when all seven princes gathered, her plan for vengeance was simple: Vittoria was expected to lure Wrath to "catch" her in the act of seducing Pride. When he walked in on the scandal, we'd expected him to let loose his fury and fight his brother. Pride would lose his wife and possibly his court if Wrath unleashed the might of his House. Thus securing the ultimate revenge against Pride for the First Witch.

While *I* had never encountered Claudia in all that time, Vittoria had to know who she truly was. My sister had been the one sent to seduce Pride after all. And yet my twin never mentioned it, never gave up our friend's secret. I wasn't sure if it was kindness on Vittoria's part or if she didn't want to alert the princes for her own reasons. If I was correct about my sister having feelings for Pride, she wouldn't want anyone to find out Claudia's secret. Maybe not even Claudia herself.

But when I considered my theory about Vesta—about my sister helping her to escape a court that made her so unhappy—I couldn't imagine my twin was as selfish or terrible as she'd like the realm to believe. She'd certainly done her fair share of dark deeds, like murdering the daughters of the witches who'd spell-locked us, but thus far that was the only true vengeance she'd sought.

She'd also murdered Antonio, but now I suspected he was close to revealing information regarding Vesta. It didn't excuse what she did, but it indicated she wasn't committing monstrous acts without calculation as she'd been all too happy to let me and the demon princes believe.

A chunk of ice cracked and slid off Sursea's face, drawing my attention to the present. The First Witch was now completely thawed from brow to chin. She slowly blinked until her lashes were free from

ice and settled an impressive glare on me.

"Fury." She spit my true name at me. "You always were the one most like—"

Sursea's mouth snapped shut with an audible click. I smiled. "The most like Lucia?"

"I have no idea who you mean. I was going to say Wrath but didn't wish to taint my already foul mood by speaking his cursed name."

Instead of calling her on the obvious lie, I stood and moved around the block of ice that contained the rest of her frozen body. "Were you aware that Claudia and I were the best of friends while I was spell-locked? Vittoria, too. I could go to her right now, and she'd welcome me into her home. She wouldn't even think twice if Vittoria showed up, risen from the dead." Sursea's gaze glittered with anger, but she kept her troublesome mouth shut. "I want the Blade of Ruination. And I will do anything to get it. Even harm a dear friend by telling her a very intriguing story. Unless you decide to help me and your daughter."

Sursea's expression didn't shift, but I sensed her calculating mind whirring. "Helping you is not in my best interest."

"You achieved your ultimate goal and got what you wanted. Pride and Lucia are separated. Your vengeance against Wrath ends now. He's paid the price of your curse long enough. And so have I. And that was never part of *our* bargain."

"Wrath's curse was very clear. Once he knew true happiness and love, it would be removed and replaced by hate. You never should have allowed him into your heart. That is your issue."

"Are you certain about that?" I summoned a large orange blossom and held the burning flower in the palm of my hand. My head canted to one side, admiring the magical rose-gold flames. "I'm not sure it's wise to ignite my fury. Have a bit of respect for your gods."

I blew the flower in the First Witch's face and singed her brows off. She screamed as the flames hovered above her skin, close enough to feel the burn but not have her flesh melt. Yet. It was a show of the control I had over my magic, the precision with which I could wield the magical flame.

"I have neither the time nor the patience to prolong this meeting. If you do not tell me what I want to know, I'll set your entire head on fire. You'll scream and choke on the scent of your own burning flesh until your vocal cords no longer work. Then I'll visit Claudia and give her this." I pulled the memory stone from my bodice and held it up. The threat of being tortured hadn't caused the color to drain from the witch's face, but seeing the memory stone did. "How do I activate the blade to break the curse?"

A muscle in Sursea's jaw flickered. She still did not want the curse to be broken, even after she'd gotten what she'd wanted: her daughter free from Pride. That's how much she hated Wrath for not giving her what she'd asked for. It was petulant. A tantrum thrown by a spoiled, highborn immortal. I shook my head.

"Vengeance. It's an ugly pursuit that encompasses many sins. Careful," I whispered, leaning in close, "or your pride will be your downfall, Sursea. A bit ironic, all things considered. That you would succumb to the sin you hated most above all, just to punish Wrath for saying no to your whims. For respecting his brother and his wife's choice. You meddled and schemed. You chose hate when all you should have done was love your child unconditionally. Allow her to make her own choices. Become her own person."

Sursea heaved a breath out, her face contorted in rage. "My daughter's blood—and only her blood—activates the blade. But she must willingly give it to you. Like all magic, it cannot be forced or taken or gotten through deceptive means." Something inside me that still felt human tightened in my chest. Sursea didn't miss the minute change, her lips pulled back into a sneer. "Regardless of my interference, Lucia does not deserve to be brought back into this world of sin. I hope you can live with your choice to ruin the happiness she's fought so hard to find."

Wrath escorted me back to his private chamber in silence, sensing my need to sort through my options. He paused outside his door and looked me over. "We haven't had many opportunities to discuss it, and now isn't the most ideal time, either, but I'd like for us to share a room. It can be either of our suites, or we can tear the wall down between them and turn it into one floor for our private living quarters. We'll add a small kitchen if you'd like."

For the first time in days my mind stopped spinning. I stared at my husband, who never ceased to amaze me with his consideration. His endless acts of love. I rolled up onto my toes and dragged his face close to mine. "Let's add the kitchen and tear the wall down. The idea of having this entire floor as our private living quarters where we can hide from the whole court is wildly appealing. And I disagree entirely. This was the perfect time to discuss it."

"Consider it done, my lady." Wrath kissed me gently, then opened the door. I followed him in and collapsed onto one of the oversized chairs set before the fireplace. The momentary elation passed, replaced by the seriousness of what had to be done next. Wrath looked

me over, his lips tugging into a frown. “Did you get the answers you needed?”

“Mostly.” The flames danced in the fireplace, reminding me of excited puppy tails wagging. I turned my attention to my husband. “The bargain you made with Sursea was for six years, six months, and six days.” Wrath dropped into the chair beside me, giving me an assessing look. Before he could ask any questions, I added, “How much time is left?”

He gazed at the fire, the flames gilding his face in warm light. “A day.”

“A day.” I hadn’t thought we’d had much time left, but a day was ridiculous. Through a remarkable act of self-control, I pulled in my fury, keeping a clear head. “If we don’t break the curse before tomorrow, it can’t ever be broken.”

“The Well of Memory worked for you.” Wrath’s tone didn’t indicate how he felt about it. And his expression was even harder to read. He got up and poured a drink from the decanter he kept on a sideboard near the mantel. He turned to me and held the lavender liquid up. “This will ensure I don’t lose you again. Curse or not, we’ll get through it this time.”

He sipped the tincture that prevented him from feeling love, and the rage I felt at our circumstances and the First Witch came flooding out.

“We will *not* get through it like that. I want your heart, Samael. I want your love without spells and tinctures keeping it locked away. Only having half of you is a curse, too. We both deserve more. We deserve true happiness. Happiness without chains or restrictions or strings attached to it. No matter the sins of our past, we do not deserve to be punished for eternity. Your only crime was helping your brother and his wife make their own choice. Now you must give up love? For what? A hateful witch’s vengeance? I will not accept that. I cannot. You ought to give your heart to whomever you choose, whenever and however you choose to give it.”

“That might never happen.” Wrath’s tone wasn’t harsh or unkind. There was a glimmer of sadness in his eyes. “So decide now, before we complete our bond, if this—what we have right now—will be good enough for you. If I cannot love you, if I cannot offer you my heart in return, you need to decide if that’s something you can live with. If you cannot…”

Wrath would walk away; he’d set me free even if it crushed him.

“That’s why you haven’t brought up completing our bond before.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I’d hoped to find a way to break the curse before we had to have this discussion.”

Silence fell between us again.

The fire crackled, its excitement over our combined anger feeding the flames. I wasn't upset with Wrath. I understood why he'd crafted a secondary strategy in the event the curse remained intact. That showed his love even when he couldn't express it. But I was greedy. I wanted it all. All of him. The good parts and the bad and every piece and part in between.

Having him love me in half measures was a miserable fate for both of us.

I stood and crawled onto his lap, resting my head against his heart. "In the Well of Memory… I found a way to break the curse." Wrath stiffened beneath me. "I need to leave to accomplish it, and I need you to remain here."

He rubbed a hand up and down my spine. "You don't sound happy."

I sensed he wanted to ask more, but he'd already figured out I'd shared all I could. I nestled against him, taking the comfort he was offering and wrapping it around me like the sweetest sort of embrace. "I might have to hurt someone I care about. Someone that doesn't deserve an ounce of pain."

Wrath kissed the top of my head. "I'm sorry."

He didn't tell me to find another way, because there wasn't one. He didn't offer to stand in my place, because he knew I needed to be the one to do it. There were no words of comfort, because I had to do something I hated to free us.

Wrath carefully tilted my face up to his, his gaze penetrating enough to stare into my soul if I allowed him to. When he brought his lips to mine, he unleashed all the things that were pointless to say and communicated all our hopes and sorrow without words.

Before I knew what was happening, Wrath used his supernatural strength and speed to maneuver us onto the plush carpet. He lay beneath me, holding me above his face, and flashed a devilish grin that had my toes curling from its sinful intent. I might have been the one on top, gazing down into his seductive eyes, but he was in control now.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "We don't have time…"

"The world could end before we know it. And I have my own fantasies to live out, my lady. If you're willing to indulge?"

I understood his need for a connection. To feel something other than fear or our sins as we raced to a finish line we weren't sure was close by. I needed him, too. He might not be able to tell me he loved me, but he could certainly show me. I nodded. "I'm happy to oblige."

"Thank fuck." He lowered me so that my knees were on either side of his head, his thumbs rubbing lazy circles on my hips. Wrath lifted my skirts and parted my lacy undergarments, slowly dragging a

finger over the slickness waiting for him.

"Is this a new lesson in conquering or surrender?" I managed to ask as his finger dipped inside, then curled ever so gently. I swore as he repeated the motion with a second finger, stretching me. He withdrew his fingers, then pushed them back in, pumping slowly.

"You tell me, my lady."

"I—goddess *curse* me."

Wrath ripped my undergarments off, then brought his mouth to my body, licking hard and deep. I jerked forward, gripping the chair as each flick of his tongue threatened to topple me over. He pulled my hips forward, then pushed back, never once removing his mouth from me.

Holding my gaze, he repeated the action, and I knew what he was requesting without words. And who was I to deny him or myself the pleasure?

I rocked forward, and the demon rewarded me with a satisfied growl that vibrated over my most sensitive area. My cursed skirts fell over him, hiding him from view.

I slowly released the chair and ripped off the lower portion of the gown, earning an amused look from my husband. I braced one hand behind me on his thigh, and the other I tangled into his hair, pulling it until he was angled just right. With my gown out of the way, I could see him and his wicked gaze much better.

Unadulterated hunger crossed his features. "Tug it harder, my lady."

"Heathen."

"My dark angel." Wrath wrapped his arms around me and feasted as I set the pace. His tongue plundered, making my body clench around it until I thought I'd go mad from the feeling. I yanked his hair even harder and rocked against him, my head thrown back. Wrath plunged a finger in with his clever tongue and set a rhythm that had me seeing stars. I came with reckless abandon, moaning his true name as a shock of pleasure bolted through me. Before I'd fully come down, I broke apart again, calling his name like a plea or a curse. Only when my legs started trembling from the aftershocks did the demon press a chaste kiss to my inner thigh. The light caress set my blood on fire again.

What we shared wasn't nearly enough. But time was our enemy at the moment, and I'd already lost too much. My husband saw the indecision in my face, and I saw the yearning in his. We needed this. Even if it meant I had less time to get the blade, I'd make it work. I moved down his body and guided his thick length into me.

Wrath laced his hands with mine, and together we soon fell over that glorious edge, reminding ourselves what we were fighting so hard

for. Love.

TWENTY-FOUR

Domenico snarled when I summoned him. “Do I look like your personal carriage?”

“No. But you will look like a new fur rug if you don’t stop complaining,” I said sweetly.

“You’re not as fun as your sister.”

“Perhaps not to you. But I am as deadly, and unlike Vittoria, if I kill you, you won’t come back. I can’t do that demonic hand trick.” I wriggled my fingers at him. “Let’s move.”

The werewolf made a disgusted noise that sounded suspiciously like choked laughter, then he sank his claws into my arms and stepped into the glittering portal. The gates were still locked from the outside, but traveling by shifter was actually best. Wrath couldn’t *transvenio*, and even if he could, I didn’t want him to know where I was going. He might suspect I was heading to my version of the Shifting Isles now, but I didn’t want to confirm anything.

If Pride found out that Lucia lived, I had little doubt he would come for her. Seeing Lucia’s memories offered only one side of their story, but as with most tales, I suspected there was much more. If Pride cared for her half as much as Wrath cared for me, then he’d tear the realm apart to make sure she was safe.

And if Wrath had been correct, if Pride had never truly fallen for anyone other than his wife—and it had all been a terrible misunderstanding based on their shared pride—I could only imagine how hard he’d fight to win her back.

When I’d first encountered Pride before the Feast of the Wolf, he’d been growing slumber root and patrolling his grounds with an army none of his brothers knew about. I’d been worried he’d been plotting against Wrath, but now I wondered if he’d been training his guards for

other purposes. Perhaps he'd been preparing to fight for his missing wife since she first disappeared.

Nonna had gotten one thing correct about demon princes: they stopped at nothing to get what they desired, especially when their hearts were involved. And if the one they loved most of all was potentially in danger? Then they'd unleash hell to save them.

Grumbling to himself about goddesses, Domenico stepped into the alley near our childhood home, a temple in disguise, and peered down the quiet street. He lifted his head and inhaled, scenting the air for any mortal or supernatural being. "Clear."

My own senses told me that, but I was pleased for confirmation. His ability to scent was greater than mine. "Stay here. I'll return as soon as I can. We need to be in and out as quickly as possible."

Domenico folded his arms across his chest and stared down at me. I knew he'd been tall, but he seemed to have grown over the last few days. He was broader, his muscles more defined. It must be another werewolf trait. "If your sister asks, I'm not going to lie to her."

"Which is why you don't know where I'm going." I patted his chest, and he grimaced. "Make sure no demons followed us. Or witches."

"I don't like this."

"I know. Thank you for doing it anyway."

Displeasure was written all over his face, but he didn't argue. As a shifter, his emotions were easily readable. He didn't hide his feelings like the demons did. Wolves were too close to nature for courtly games.

After what we'd been through, I understood the appeal my sister might see in them. Unlike vampires, witches, and demon princes, it was almost refreshing to know exactly where you stood with a werewolf. It wasn't the time to ask, but I needed to see what his response was.

"You met Vesta, Greed's commander."

"Your point, goddess?"

"I heard a rumor that she might have been half werewolf. If that were true and she chose to run away, would you fight for her if that's what she wished? Even if Greed were to find out she lived."

His eyes glowed that pale purple, which indicated he was close to shifting. And he was also enraged. "I would tear the throat out of anyone who threatened my family. And I don't care about demons enough to aid them in any way, especially if one of their own decided to leave."

"Are all pack members considered family?"

Domenico lifted his face and breathed deeply. "Go. We're about to have company."

I hesitated for the span of one breath. A new theory was forming, but I couldn't lose my chance at breaking the curse to follow that thread. Soon there would be no clock ticking and I'd solve this mystery once and for all.

I hurried down the alley and darted into the night, sticking to the shadows and listening for any signs of pursuit. It was late enough that most lights were out in the houses I passed. No one walked the streets, save for one or two stragglers who'd been deep in their cups. Claudia would be in bed, but she'd rouse when I knocked at the door. Or tossed a pebble at her window.

I was just rounding the corner and wondering what I'd do if her aunt Carolina was awake when I saw her slip out of the house wearing a dark hood. Carolina headed straight for a woman lingering near the opposite end of the street, wearing a similar dark robe. After their loss at House Greed, their use of cloaks didn't surprise me.

I stopped dead in my tracks and pressed closer to the nearest building. Carolina paused, and the other woman glanced around, inadvertently giving the light from the moon an opportunity to reveal her features. Nonna Maria. I wasn't surprised to see her cavorting with a dark witch. Nonna had been the witch Sursea summoned in that memory Claudia purged. The one who'd escorted Claudia here and gave her a new family. My grandmother had been working closely with the First Witch all along, and that alone ought to make me hate her.

I was… not relieved, but content to see she'd made it out of the bloodbath that occurred at House Greed. She'd wronged many, but I didn't want her to die. Regardless of anything, she still felt like my grandmother and I believed the love she'd had for us had turned real. Nonna had been tender with us, had cared for us and been there on our darkest days.

I strained to hear her voice, but the two witches must have cast a spell or set up a ward to contain their whispers. No matter how hard I tried to hear them, no sound drifted my way. I hadn't had the capacity to feel anything about Nonna's involvement with Sursea while trapped in that memory, but it would have been another crushing blow if I'd remained mortal.

Nonna never liked that Vittoria, Claudia, and I were such close friends. She'd blamed it on the fact that Claudia's family practiced the dark arts, but now I knew the truth. They'd purposely tried to keep us apart because of who we all really were.

That, at least, I understood. Keeping House Vengeance away from Claudia after we'd helped Sursea's devious plan come to life would have been a kindness to her.

How naive we'd all been, scraping together time after work to

drink wine on the beach and share our hopes and dreams. We'd all cried together as many times as we'd laughed. We'd shared our broken hearts and secret longings. The three of us were sisters not all by blood, but by choice. None of us knew something far more sinister had originally bound us together.

Nonna took one last look around before she and Carolina hurried off together. Part of me wanted to follow them, see where they were going, what they might be plotting, but there was no time to waste. I lingered in the shadows for a few more minutes, just to be certain they wouldn't double back and attempt something nefarious. Using my heightened senses, I listened hard and didn't hear anyone walking close by. Wherever the witches were heading, they'd truly gone.

Quickly, I stood on the stoop and brought my fist to the door. I pounded loud enough to wake Claudia, but not loud enough for any neighbors to overhear or be startled by it. A moment later, a candle flickered to life upstairs. I subtly glanced down the street again. I didn't sense any Umbra demons and only heard the muffled sounds of mortals breathing next door as they slept.

Another moment passed, and then the bolt slid out of place and the door creaked open. My friend stood there, mouth agape as she took me in. "Emilia! Stars above, you look… are your eyes a different color?" She shook her head and stepped aside. "Come in. Your nonna said you were missing. Are you all right? Where have you been? I've been so worried. I thought whatever had been killing those witches had gotten you, too, and they just didn't want to tell me."

I stepped into her home, and she'd just shut the door when we both wrapped our arms around each other in a fierce hug. With everything that had happened, with all I'd learned and how much I'd changed, I was relieved there was still one person who genuinely cared.

Even if things weren't exactly as they seemed, our connection had been real. Possibly the only real thing in an entire realm made up of fantasy. And even that might not last if she wanted her memory back.

"I wish I could tell you everything," I said, meaning every word. "But I can't stay long. And you can't tell anyone you saw me."

"What the devil is going on, Emilia? The coven rebanded, but they won't allow anyone aside from the council to attend meetings. I tried scrying, but it's as if they've put a block on my magic. I haven't even been able to dream."

I'd almost forgotten that Claudia had been blessed by the goddess of sight and premonitions; she'd have visions we couldn't always decipher.

Having her magic blocked was a fate I knew too well, and I hated that they'd clipped her magical wings. I wondered what else they

might have taken from her, what powers might be lying dormant inside her she couldn't recall. Her mother was always scheming and plotting, and it seemed she was still playing a game.

"And do you know what is most unusual?" she asked, and I shook my head. "They were able to free old Sofia Santorini's mind from its curse. My aunt was heading over to her house now to see what she remembers, if anything."

I squeezed her gently, then stepped back. At least I now knew what Carolina and Nonna were up to. "Don't trust everything the witches say. They're not necessarily bad, but they have an agenda."

"The witches?" Claudia's brows knotted together. "You speak as if you aren't one of us."

I inhaled deeply and held my hand up, summoning a burning flower, and watched my friend's expression turn from confusion to wonder. She reached for the flower and yanked her hand back from the burn, searching my face.

"Goddess above. You can't be." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "How?"

"It's a very long, twisted tale."

She stared at me, then at the burning flower for another silent moment. Awe spread across her features, and she looked ready to explode from all her questions.

"Given your fire magic and the fact you're a goddess, I imagine so." She turned and motioned for me to join her. "Let's sit."

I did my best to not rush her, trying not to focus on the ticking clock in my mind, and followed her into the tiny kitchen. She pulled open the cabinet and went about pouring us drinks from her personal collection. I noticed the herbs drying for her tonic to forget and swallowed hard. She placed my drink in front of me, then raised her brows.

"Tell me. I need to know what's going on."

"The short version is the witches put a spell-lock on me and Vittoria, containing our magic and immortality, essentially making us mortal witches. That curse you mentioned? The one with the devil? It affected several other beings. Me and Vittoria included."

Claudia pressed her hip against the countertop and tossed back her drink. "My best friends are goddesses. It's a lot to digest. I feel as if I should bow or pray." A look of horror crossed her face. "Should I set up an altar? Stars above, Em. This is strange."

Despite every dark thing in my life, I laughed. A genuine, happy sound. Her questions hadn't been laden with sarcasm, only concern. "Please do not ever pray or bow. Most especially to Vittoria. You know how insufferable she can be."

Tears shimmered in her eyes.

“Vittoria is alive?”

The hope that crossed her features brought a tightness to my chest. I nodded. “Yes. Her death was the beginning of breaking the spell-lock. She’d figured out what happened from hearing the secrets a spell book whispered to her. She orchestrated her own ‘murder’ to free herself and plot our revenge.” I didn’t want to overwhelm my friend, so I quickly moved on. “There is a dagger called the Blade of Ruination. It’s the only weapon with the ability to break curses.”

“Emilia, no.” Claudia sucked in a sharp breath. “Hexed items come with a steep price.”

“I know.” I watched her carefully. “Please. I need you to activate it for me. And tell me what I need to do to use it to break the curse. Time’s running out. I have less than a day.”

My friend shook her head. “I… can’t. I would do anything for you, you know that, but please don’t ask me to do this.”

“Do you not remember how?”

She gave me a sad smile. “It’s something my aunt has instilled in me since I first came to live with her. I just don’t think you realize what the price will be. For you.”

I exhaled. “I’m willing to pay anything. Just tell me what I need to do.”

Indecision warred with what I sensed was her desire to help me.

“The blade expects an equal trade,” she finally said. “If you wish to break a curse, it will want to use your power to do so. All of it.” Claudia bent and pulled up a travertine floor tile, removing a cloth-wrapped dagger. “The one who’s cursed needs to use it. Willingly.”

Dread rolled through me. “How do you mean?”

“The cursed one needs to feed the blade your magic until it collects each drop.”

I stared at the dagger in her hand. It looked like a regular dagger; the steel shined in the candlelight, and the hilt was made of a dulled onyx leather. For something so powerful, it was rather unremarkable. It didn’t appear to be capable of anything as diabolical as killing a prince of Hell or breaking a curse. Which was why—aside from being hidden under my friend’s floor—it likely went unfound for decades.

“The price is magic for magic,” I reiterated. Claudia nodded. “When you said, ‘feed the blade,’ you meant I must be stabbed?”

“Yes.”

“And only the one who’s cursed can deliver the blow?”

“Yes. Breaking a curse is a complex process.” Claudia heaved a great breath. “My blood activates it, but then the rest depends on following the rules precisely. The one who is to sacrifice must do so willingly. Then the one administering the blow must also be willing to do so.”

Wrath would need to willingly deliver the attack, and I doubted my husband would be easily persuaded to do so. Then there was the one thing I wasn't focusing on just yet. The part where I needed to give up *all* my power. Forever. I'd only just gotten it back, and I felt whole for the first time in what felt like an eternity. Now the gods were mocking me, forcing me to relinquish it again. Of my own free will. Without hesitation or regret.

It was one more way the First Witch would take from me, and I hated it.

"There's one more catch," Claudia said. I was incapable of being surprised at this point. This hexed object was a hideous tool created by a vengeful witch, of course there was one more unpleasant string attached. Sursea didn't operate in an easy or giving manner. I mentally prepared myself. "Once I activate it with my blood, you have only one hour to complete the rest of the power exchange. The blade only allows one opportunity for any one curse to be broken."

"How would it know?"

"After I feed it my blood, you will do the same. Then your hour begins."

Which meant I had one hour to return to the Seven Circles, decide if I was truly willing to give up my power, convince my husband to stab me, and break the curse before this opportunity was forever lost to us. Unless… blood and bones. *No.* I refused to bring Claudia back with me.

"I could go with you," she said, reading my mind and the worry that had probably been written on my face. "Wherever you've been. I could go to make sure you have a full hour."

Claudia's earnest expression held no deception. No ulterior motives. She was simply a good friend. A decent person. Someone who was willing to help a loved one in need.

And I would never put her in a place where she might expose her true identity to herself or those who'd been seeking her. I might have conspired against her before, but that was one mistake I'd never repeat again. If giving up my power could help undo even the slightest bit of pain I'd caused by working with the First Witch, there really was no choice left to make at all.

I would right these wrongs and pay the price.

I removed the memory stone from my bodice and laid it on the table before me. Claudia's attention moved to it, her face paling.

"This memory stone contains the reason why I'll never ask you to come with me. It belongs to you. It's something you chose to purge, to forget for eternity. I'm leaving it here, if ever you want answers." I wished I could offer her more, but it would have to do. I tugged a little leather pouch from my belt and placed the stone safely inside so

Claudia could decide what she wished to do without touching it. “Someone I trust very dearly told me that once you know the truth, you can never go back to the time before. Choose wisely. There is no urgency for you, no judgment.”

“Do you regret it?” Claudia asked, her voice quiet, a touch sad. “Discovering the truth?”

I thought about the heartache. The deception. The many betrayals. “Life would be simpler if I didn’t know. Familiar, even. But no, I wouldn’t go back, given the choice. That’s a decision only you can make, though. If you’re happy now, content, that’s all that matters.”

With her attention locked onto the memory stone, she whispered, “Sometimes I dream. Of a life I think I might have lived. A man I might have loved. But it always ends in a nightmare. With him ripping out my heart. Other times it’s me who tears it from my own chest. Or sometimes even his.” When she finally glanced up, her expression was one of gratitude, if not relief. “Thank you for the stone, for the choice. Are you ready to activate the blade?”

I wasn’t, but I had to be. I nodded. “Thank you, Claudia. For always being the truest friend I’ve ever had.”

Her grin was full of mischief. “I’m sure we’ll have plenty of trouble to get into in the future. Now give me your palm, goddess. The most important hour of your existence is about to begin.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Wrath stared at the legendary dagger. He'd been impressed I'd retrieved the Blade of Ruination right up until I told him what we needed to do to break the curse. Now he looked as if I'd brought a viper into his private library and placed it on his lap. He drove the dagger into the top of the desk, the force of it causing the weapon to vibrate. "No."

"It is my choice to give up my magic. I cannot imagine a better reason to do so."

The demon crossed his arms, his expression turning darker than his increasingly stormy mood. "I respect that, but not stabbing my wife is *my* choice."

We stared at each other, neither one of us backing down. Any other time, any other instance, and I'd not argue. He had every right to make his decision without interference. This was bigger than him, though. Bigger than us. And we had to act, now.

"We are running out of time and options. Quite literally. We have less than an hour to complete the activation or this option is lost. Please. Do not fight me on this. It is our best opportunity to shatter this curse, and you know that."

"And if the witches are lying, what then? Do you really believe Sursea?" He stood from his oversized desk, jabbing a finger down at the blade he refused to touch. It was likely the only dagger the general of war wouldn't wield. And ironically the one he needed to the most. Sursea had played her game well. "They have proved they lie and manipulate time and again. Where is our guarantee that if I stab you and remove all your power, you won't die? How do we know if the blade requires your magic or if they simply wish to take it for their own? We don't have enough information, and I will not risk you or

your magic being given to an enemy, especially when Sursea is involved."

I pressed my lips together. I could not tell him who'd given me the information or who'd helped me. "I trust my source. And you will need to trust me."

"Trusting you isn't the issue." Wrath paced away, his hands flexing at his sides. "Your source might also be trustworthy, but there is no guarantee that their information wasn't planted. They might not be aware it's false. If I knew who you got this from, I could investigate further."

I'd already considered that Claudia's memory might have been tampered with and decided to press ahead. I glanced at the clock near the mantel. I wasn't sure how long the process of removing my magic took and didn't want to continue arguing. I loved my husband, but I would never betray my friend a second time. Claudia had a right to choose if she wished to become involved with the princes of Hell again.

I also would not put Wrath in a position to keep this secret from his brother, either. If Pride discovered that Wrath knew his wife was alive and where she could be found, that wouldn't be something easily overlooked or forgiven. With good reason.

I held my hands out, pleading. "The blade might kill me, but it also might do exactly what you, your brothers, Sursea, and my source say it does: *break curses*. When I first summoned you, you said, 'One day you'll call me Death.' You had to have known this was a possibility. And it would not have stopped you then. Do not turn soft now, demon. Not when we need your sin the most."

Wrath's gaze was pure gold fire when it clashed against mine. "Stop."

"No." I sensed the simmering rise of his sin and I sauntered over to him, eyeing him from head to toe. "When I stabbed you I *hated* it. Hated that you'd made me do something so brutal. But it was necessary. I do not want to bring only vengeance and hate to the world. I want to right a terrible wrong. It's the right thing to do, and I know you care about true justice, fair justice. Even when it's hard or personal. And then, when you are able to love me fully, you'll be free to tell me." I rolled up onto my toes and brought my lips to his ear. "Then you'll take me right here. On your desk. And *show* me."

Wrath's jaw was clenched so tightly it was a wonder he didn't crack any teeth. He drew back and stared at me with a strange mixture of emotion playing across his face, as if simultaneously memorizing my features and also desperately searching for a way out of this. But, the mighty demon of war knew I was right.

"Do you have my *cornicello*?" I asked. "And Vittoria's?"

The temperature plummeted. “Do you think my wings will tempt me?” Wrath’s voice was low and dangerous as he prowled around the room. “That I’d put you at risk to get them back?”

“No. But I want to make sure when the curse breaks, we’ve truly succeeded. If your wings are restored, there will be physical proof it’s broken.” My breath came out in little white clouds as the air turned colder. Frost coated the iron chandelier above us. “We are going to get through this, Samael.” A new thought crossed my mind. My husband wanted an equal, so perhaps the loss of my magic was another burden he didn’t wish to bear. “Will you be all right if I don’t have magic?”

He cast an incredulous look my way. “You haven’t had access to your full power for twenty years, according to the way time works on the Shifting Isles, and you could cast only minimal spells as a shadow witch. Aside from my anger that they’d done that to you, and you were unable to know the truth, that didn’t matter to me in the least.”

“But this will be different. I’ll never have that much magic or power again. Is that something you’re concerned about? For your court? I’m sure there are more like Lord Makaden who would stir the pot and gossip. Call you weak. Is choosing your heart something that will bring destruction to your House?”

His anger flared as he stalked back to me. “I don’t give a high holy fuck about my court, my lady. Magic does not make you powerful. Your courage. Your heart. Your mind. Your very soul makes you a force to be reckoned with. My only concern is whether you will survive. I will take you without magic. Without godsdamn royal titles. Or care for anything other than your happiness. Once restored to my full power, I’ll have enough magic for both of us. Trust in that.”

If only he could share it. I reached for his hand, rubbing my thumb in calming circles over his skin. “We’re running out of time. Where should I stand, by the desk, or is it easier if I sit?”

He shook his head. “I’ll send for the Crone. There has to be a way around this.”

“We don’t know where she is.” I squeezed his hand gently. “And if we wait any longer, we might never have this chance again. Please. Don’t keep your heart from me out of fear.”

I let go of his hand and moved to the desk, yanking the Blade of Ruination from where he’d stabbed it and held it out, hilt first. “Take this.” Frost kissed the wood, coated the journals on each demon House. I ignored it. The temperature didn’t warm, but Wrath finally came to my side and accepted the blade. It was too soon to feel relief, but the first hurdle had been crossed. “Get the amulets and put them on. Once you’re ready, we’ll begin.”

Silently, Wrath removed a pouch from a secret compartment near the fireplace and dumped the contents into his palm. Silver and gold

glinted in the firelight. Our amulets.

I felt nothing when I looked at them. No sense of nostalgia. No warm memories of blessing them each full moon with Vittoria while Nonna guided us. I saw them for what they were: objects that had caused my husband pain and torment for years. Objects that brought confusion to my memories and Vittoria's, forcing us to remain in the dark. It was time for them to return to where they belonged. Wrath looped them over his head, jaw locked as he came back to where I waited.

He stood before me, blade in fist, and stared down. His expression was as cold as the air now. My husband was donning that mask again, becoming the king his realm needed, even beyond his court. He was becoming the partner *I* needed.

We'd been through hell and back, quite literally, and this would set our world right. I held my own emotions in check, refusing to show one second of doubt. If he sensed any trepidation, he would damn us for eternity.

Wrath's attention finally dropped to my bodice. It was a simple, rose-gold gown with lavender, pale blue, and green flowers embroidered onto it. After I'd returned from Claudia, I'd quickly changed. I didn't want any trace of where I'd been remaining, and I hadn't put much thought into what I'd grabbed from the wardrobe.

Now I realized my mistake in wearing the pale pink instead of black. My husband would see me bleed as he twisted the dagger. Just as I'd watched his white shirt turn red when I'd stabbed him. It was not the sort of favor I wished to return.

With nimble fingers, I unlaced the front of my dress, pulling the top slightly apart—just enough to expose the bare skin over my heart. I held his gaze, pouring all the love and emotion I felt for him into it. I imagined how it felt to kiss him, how incredible it was to make love to him and feel him joined to me as if we were one.

Hate and fear and vengeance had torn us apart. And love would heal us.

Nonna Maria once told me to follow my heart, and even though she'd lied before—even though I no longer *had* a mortal heart—I felt the truth of that now. Love was the most powerful magic. No matter how many twists and bumps I'd encountered along the way, I'd finally found my home. And no one, no curse, no force in this realm or the next would take it away from me again.

"I love you."

Wrath couldn't say it back, but the iciness left his features. He brought his mouth down on mine, his kiss passionate and full of longing. He'd felt the emotions I'd fed to him, knew I wanted to do this with every fiber of my cursed soul. I kissed him as fiercely, as

freely. His tongue demanded entry, and as my lips parted, I felt the sting of metal pushing into my chest. Wrath bit down on my lip, distracting me from the pain as the Blade of Ruination sank deeper.

"Incipio." Wrath spoke the activation spell against my lips as I cried out, the sound swallowed as my husband kissed me again with desperate fervor. As if the connection of our lips and tongues would tether me to him. Would prevent me from fading into Death's realm.

As soon as Wrath activated the spell, my magic flared up, sensing a new master taking control. The Blade of Ruination. My power wanted no part of it; it did not wish to obey a new master. A raging inferno was being ripped from me, and it fought against the blade's pull, but I'd given my power freely, willingly. And it could not overcome the summoning.

I screamed as my body burned and the blade heated. The metal seared inside me, and I'd never known such intense torture as I did in that moment. Wrath's mouth moved across my jaw to my temple, his arms wrapped around me as if he could tear the pain away.

"Shh." He pressed a kiss to my temple. "It's all right. It'll be over soon."

I tried to focus on his featherlight kisses, tried to hold on to the little bit of light he offered. But it was no use. Pain rose up and crashed down, dragging me with it. This was worse than when Vittoria removed my mortal heart. There was no end and no sense of time as the blade continued to tear my magic from me.

Rose-gold fire exploded between us, the blade hungrily lapping up the flames before they could touch Wrath. I squeezed my eyes shut, teeth clenched, as the heat grew to unbearable temperatures. Sweat dotted my brow, dripped down my chest, sizzled against the blade.

Tears streamed down my face, dampening Wrath's fingers that still clenched tightly around the Blade of Ruination's hilt. My instinct to survive, to retain my power, made me want to fight back. It took effort I didn't know I possessed to lock my arms at my sides, to will my magic away. The tortuous magical transfer went on for several long minutes that felt like hours.

A hole in my center grew, and where power once welled up, it was slowly being replaced with nothing. My body grew weaker with each ounce of magic that left me, the instinct to fight draining from my tensed body. My screams slowed as my knees shook, and suddenly the dagger was yanked free. It clattered onto the floor as Wrath scooped me up and cradled me against his chest. His heart hammered a frantic beat, the rhythm keeping my own blood pounding.

I hadn't died, but it felt like some not-so-small part of me had. A sob wrenched free, and I couldn't tell if it was relief for what we'd done or grief at what I'd lost. Perhaps it was both. My eyes squeezed

shut as if that would prevent the tears from continuing to fall.

Wrath held me tighter, rocking me for several long minutes, until the overwhelming sense of loss receded a bit. I didn't want him to regret our choice and struggled to pull myself together.

Heat continued to surround us, and I finally managed to crack open an eye. Beautiful burning wings of flame extended from behind Wrath. Silver-tipped and fierce. Another tear slid along my cheek. Not from sadness or grief this time, but from witnessing divine glory so close. Vittoria and I were goddesses from the underworld, but Wrath was true divinity, and I was overcome by the force of love that radiated around him.

That sense of great loss, that grief of giving up my magic, it didn't disappear, but I allowed that feeling of awe to cleanse my sadness. To remind me of all I'd gained. All *we'd* gained. The curse was truly broken. This part of our nightmare was over.

As above, so below. Together we'd achieved balance. We won. And yet…

"They're incredible," I whispered, blinking as the wings grew impossibly larger. I'd never seen anything as stunning and deadly in all my life. Even when we'd known each other before, Wrath had never shown me his wings. They were a weapon he'd kept hidden. "*You're* incredible."

Wrath held me tighter, his chin now resting on my head. Tension hadn't yet left his body—if anything, he was coiled tighter than before.

He also hadn't uttered a single word since we broke the curse.

A bead of sweat rolled from my hairline down my neck, and I shivered. Wrath shook slightly, burying his face in my hair, and I realized it wasn't sweat, but tears. I mustered enough energy to wrap my arms around him, holding him as he wept.

"We're all right," I croaked. "It's all right. It's over."

His mighty wings flapped, and within the flames of the inner feathers there were a thousand tiny gold flecks. My focus slid from the gold flecks to the silver tips. The colors of each of our amulets were aspects of his wings. I'd always wondered about that. Once, I'd thought it meant one was blessed by the sun goddess and the other by the moon goddess. How wrong I'd been.

Wrath inhaled once, then exhaled slowly. He pressed his lips to my forehead and placed me on my feet. I couldn't stop staring at the fiery wings. They reminded me of my magic, but there was not a sense of familiarity to them. This was his magic through and through, and yet I was drawn to them like a moth to a flame. I went to touch a feather but drew my hand back and gave Wrath a sheepish look. "I forgot fire will likely burn me now."

Sadness crashed into me again as I inadvertently sought my magic. A rift in my center split further at the emptiness that was there; it was the place where Source once curled up, waiting for me to tap into it. Now there was nothing. It felt as if I'd lost a limb—my body still reached for it, confused when it grasped nothing at all. I blinked until I was able to control any tears from falling. Despite my loss, I *was* happy I broke the curse. I wanted redemption for the role I'd played as a vengeance goddess. But even through the good, I still mourned my loss. Felt it acutely. I'd never again know what it was like to wield fire magic.

"Touch them." Wrath watched me closely, sensing my mood. "I am able to control my wings. And even if I wasn't, you're my wife. They will not burn you; they'll simply feel warm."

Tentatively I reached out, curling my fingers through the magical feathers of flame. Wrath was right—it didn't burn. It was similar to placing a hand in a warm patch of sunlight, soaking in the rays. Or running my fingers through the water of a summer sea.

This, at least, was like my magic. Comforting, yet capable of massive destruction. Even though the power wasn't mine, it felt like some small part of me carried on in him.

"The wings depicted in your throne room are ebony," I said. "I didn't expect to see these."

"I'd had the stained glass changed to what I'd last seen."

I thought of the scene I'd witnessed from Sursea's memory stone—of how the wings had turned the color of ash when she'd drained away his magic. I was glad we'd won. That we'd defeated someone so driven by hate through the power of our love.

My lips tugged upward as I stroked another feather and the flames teasingly fluttered against my skin. I dragged another finger along the outer edge of his wing, and the same sensation rolled down my back. My attention shot to my husband, immediately noting the devious expression he wore.

"What was that?" I asked as heat slid down my spine, similar to a feather lightly caressing me. My skin tingled pleasantly for another few seconds where the magical feather had touched.

"I might have forgotten to mention an ability I'd lost when my fire magic was taken."

Another feather of honeyed heat meandered along my neck, gliding across my collarbone before descending to lovingly stroke the wound the Blade of Ruination caused.

The feather slowly spread outward, tracing circles along my breast. Any lingering hollowness or grief dissipated as the flicker of heat rolled across the tight bud, causing a new warmth to unfurl from my belly downward.

“Devil curse me.” My fingers dug into Wrath’s shoulders as that wicked bead of delight moved to my hips, then curled around my inner thighs.

“I’d rather not, my lady. I’ve had enough of curses.” Wrath’s chuckle was deep and sensual as that feather fluttered against my thigh and I swore under my breath. “Lust isn’t the only one who can manifest desire. Only this isn’t yours.” He nipped at my earlobe before kissing the sting away. “It’s *mine*.”

What had begun as a gentle, featherlike feeling turned into a finger of heat. Wrath grinned as he walked us back toward a shelf of books, slowly pinning my arms above my head. His glorious wings spread wide, covering us in our own private, fiery blanket of white-hot passion.

He bent until his lips brushed my ear. “Would you like to see what sinful things I can do with them, my lady?”

TWENTY-SIX

Heat pulsed between my thighs. Wrath's magic was as soft as velvet as it gently stroked me, waiting for an answer. Taking a dagger to the chest rapidly faded from my mind, thanks in part to the quick healing of my immortality and the exquisite caresses from my prince. Instead of dwelling on the loss of my magic, I focused on my husband and the wicked gleam in his eyes, the seductive privacy his curtain of wings provided, and all the things we could do right here.

My attention dropped to his full lips while I vividly imagined the interesting places we might make love, the positions. Losing my magic hurt deeply, but suddenly picturing Wrath and me joining high above our realm, among the moon and stars, took *some* of the sting away.

If I searched hard enough, I would still find magic in everyday things. And making love to the king of demons among the stars was hardly average. The curse was broken, and there were no limits to what we could achieve together. I eyed the manacles hanging from the ceiling in the alcove, and new, devious thoughts flooded in.

"I can't tell exactly what you're thinking, but I can sense what you're feeling now." He kissed up the column of my throat, and my eyes fluttered shut. Wrath knew exactly where to touch to drive me wild with need. "If you want me, say the words, my lady." He traced the bare flesh along my bodice, his caress a seduction of its own. "My queen." He dipped his head, and where his clever fingers had just touched, he now used his tongue. "My love."

His mouth closed over my breast, and my breath caught from his words and the way he drew on my flesh, sucking and teasing over my clothing.

"I want you, Samael."

I'd only just finished whispering my consent when Wrath's heated

magic unleashed itself. That soft, decadent, featherlike stroking moved across my sex, teasing my flesh until I chased the sensation building inside me. Another feather of heat licked my breasts, replacing Wrath's mouth as my husband leisurely kissed me.

With my hands still pinned above my head and Wrath's tongue in my mouth, his magic caressed me everywhere at once. Pleasure rocketed through me, electrifying each nerve as the demon intensified his magic, feeding more of his power to those phantom fingers of ecstasy.

Wrath had called himself His Royal Highness of Undeniable Desire, and I'd thought I'd tasted that level of seduction before. But nothing, *nothing*, compared with this.

Not Lust's magic or Greed's. Gluttony's sinful party and witnessing couples lost in the throes of pure rapture—none of it held a candle to the magnitude of Wrath's… love.

It wasn't simply the magic he was using to enhance my pleasure, nor was it the immense power he had. It was the attention and care he used, the unending desire to please me, to satisfy the person he loved in every way imaginable, that heightened the experience. Wrath's desire to show his love for me far outweighed any baser wanting of my body. He wanted that, too, but it was my heart he yearned for above all else. My mind and my soul. Just as I wanted his.

Wrath's magic slipped inside me, the sensation a glorious mixture of hot kisses and deep thrusts that filled and stretched me, perfectly synchronized to each flick of his tongue against mine. All the while that magic heat lathed my breasts until they grew heavy with need. Wrath kissed me harder, grinding his hips against mine, his erection hitting all the right places. I writhed against him, searching for release.

"Wrath."

I didn't have to elaborate. In a thrilling motion, my husband banded an arm around me and flew us the short distance to his desk. With one wing, he cleared journals and pots of ink from the surface before laying me down on it. A beat later, his trousers were off, and he towered above me, looking like a brutally handsome god. The demon prince didn't rip off my gown like his expression hinted he wished to; he slid it up my body as he moved over me.

He drank in each inch of my skin as if it were all he needed in life. A flash of something unreadable crossed his features, but he crushed whatever doubt or worry he'd felt.

When he pressed the blunt head of his erection to my entrance and slowly pushed in, he brought his mouth close to mine and whispered, "I love you."

Tears pricked my eyes. I held him tightly, committing this

moment to memory. Even though he'd shown me he loved me, hearing it… it made the bad parts we'd endured somehow more bearable. The last time he'd said those fateful words, I'd immediately forgotten them.

"I love you." I cupped his face and kissed him chastely, savoring the bliss of the moment as we fully joined. Wrath pulled back, his gaze locked onto mine. For a moment, he didn't move. His fists were planted on either side of me, hard against the desk, his body just as tense.

He was bracing himself for the curse to exact its revenge once again. To wrench me away, except this time it would be for an eternity.

Devil curse, Sursea. I'd be damned if I would allow her to ruin this moment. I did not give up my magic to see the haunted look in his eyes, the flicker of uncertainty when he finally admitted how he felt and didn't dull his emotions with a tonic. Nor would I allow any doubts to surface each time he said those three cherished words.

I rocked my hips upward, drawing him to the present, and drawing him deeper inside me. We were here. Together. And nothing would change that. Unless we decided to murder each other, he was *mine*. And I was his. For eternity.

"Please say that again." I ran my hands up and down his arms, soothing, pleading. His wings flared out to either side like weapons, the heat making the air around us shimmer. Wrath, the king of demons, afraid of nothing—except losing me—hesitated. "I'm still here. We're all right."

He traced my features with his gaze. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Demon." I reached over and stroked a warm feather, marveling at the full body tingles I suddenly felt. I stopped playing with his wings and pulled him in for a long kiss. It took only a moment for him to respond, his mouth moving over mine hungrily. Thank the goddess his mind was finally on more pleasant things. "Now that that's settled, show me all your new tricks. I want you to take me on every surface and every damn wall in this chamber."

The last vestiges of stress left him and were quickly replaced by a roguish glint in his eyes. "Let's try half the surfaces for now, my love. Even with your immortal body, I doubt you can handle the full might of my… power."

Cocky prince of Hell. I thrusted upward, earning a surprised curse from the demon followed by a groan of pleasure as I repeated the motion. "Try me, demon."

"Remember, I warned you, wife."

The demon's wings glowed a brilliant silver as he brought them around us. The magical heat returned and moved down my body like

warmed honey, sliding around where Wrath and I were already joined. The heat pulsed there for a minute, strumming my body until it hummed with need. Then my husband began waging the best sort of war on me—he slowly pulled out and thrusted in, the magical heat tingling so intensely I came before he'd even truly begun.

"Fuck," I swore. Repeatedly. The only words or coherent thought I was capable of.

Wrath's low chuckle, combined with his continued deep thrusts, had me writhing up from the desk, my back arched high as my body exploded from the sensation again and again.

"Pace yourself, my love," he said. "We haven't even left the desk yet."

"I hate you," I cried out, the sound proving I felt the very opposite as it quickly devolved to a moan of pleasure. "I hate you in the darkest of ways."

"You've told me that before." Wrath tugged my bodice apart and nuzzled against my heart before turning his attention to my heaving breasts. "Let's see how badly you hate me now."

My husband unleashed himself and his magic, and soon he didn't even need his wings to bring us both to soaring heights. We came together, murmuring the words that had been stolen from us, over and over until we flew higher and plummeted over the edge once, twice, then half a dozen times more.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Wrath squeezed every drop of moisture from the linen cloth, dripping soapy water and bubbles down the front of my body. I leaned against his chest and closed my eyes, enjoying the first pure bit of relaxation we'd ever experienced.

After we'd accomplished making love on top of only *two* surfaces in his private library, much to the demon's vast amusement, he magicked us to his bathing chamber for a refreshing soak. His wings were tucked away, but I swore I still felt the phantom heat lingering around us.

Nestled between his powerful legs, my head resting in the crook of his shoulder while he leisurely dragged the linen over my body, I released the remaining tension I'd been carrying for the last few months. There were still matters to be dealt with—what to do with the First Witch, as well as clearing my sister's name. Proving that Vesta was alive and well and left of her own free will and that my twin had nothing to do with her "murder." And whatever trouble the Star Witches might still be plotting. I hoped that my show of magic was enough to keep them in the Shifting Isles for a while. And as for the vampires, after Wrath's brutal display, I believed they'd remain in their region and rethink any notion of war.

But for now, with the curse finally broken, we had a moment to simply breathe, to enjoy each other's company without anyone interfering or any clocks ticking down our time together. I'd like nothing more than to put off dealing with those final pieces for a month.

Sleep tugged at me, and I gave in to the alluring pull of dreams. It had been a long, exhausting haul. I'd gone from removing the threat of the witches as they invaded Greed's circle to attending a

celebratory ball to the Well of Memory; from there I'd threatened Sursea, visited Claudia to retrieve the dagger, and broken the curse.

Resting never felt so good.

"We should send invitations out within the hour." Wrath's deep voice startled me awake. "For the coronation. We'll want to crown you by nightfall, if possible. With the curse broken, and your magic gone, it is a prime time for someone to attack."

And just like that, the serenity was gone. I twisted in his arms. "Remind me to not make the mistake of thinking a bath with you will *ever* be peaceful. First the Blade of Ruination speech, now this." I smiled as I shook my head. "It's a good thing I love you, or I'd wish to hold your head under water for a few seconds."

He kissed the tip of my nose. "At least you didn't say a few minutes. That shows progress, my lady."

"Perhaps I simply enjoy certain parts of you too much to give them up for good."

He splashed water at me. "I'll make sure those parts tend to your needs daily, lest I find myself on the wrong end of your blade."

"Smart demon." I lovingly patted his cheek. Seriousness replaced the levity. "Who do you believe will attack? The witches?"

"Sursea is in captivity, but I doubt her location has remained a secret. The coven could be planning something as they rebanded. They already staged an attack on House Greed. Without the fear of your magic, they might strike here next."

"To free Sursea."

Wrath nodded, a grim expression on his face. "If they timed it perfectly, and somehow managed to slip past my defenses, they could break her free while we're at the coronation."

"It would be an ideal distraction. A good opportunity. But would they really try something again so soon after they'd lost so many?"

"I would think they'd be smart enough to leave well enough alone, especially after taking such a large blow to their forces, but one can never be too sure."

I studied my husband. "Even if it's unlikely, you're still planning on the attack happening."

"If presented with an enticing opportunity, most do not pass it up. Even if they believe it's a trap. There's always a chance it isn't. Or that they still have a higher rate for success."

"Which would be true. As we'd both be occupied."

"Not just occupied. The coronation will take place in the Sin Corridor, in front of each of my brothers."

It wasn't fear that made my stomach twist, but unease. "They could attack each House of Sin while all the princes are gone."

"Or they could focus on the Sin Corridor."

And if they managed to free Sursea, they wouldn't need to worry about the numbers they lost. They were undoubtedly craving vengeance, and they could potentially destroy every demon prince and at least one goddess if they took a chance. I didn't like it, even with the combined power of the seven princes of Hell, it seemed too great a risk.

"Why not have the ceremony here?" I asked.

"The crowning of a prince or princess consort would take place in the House of Sin they'd rule over. But to be crowned queen, the ceremony must take place in the corridor. It shows you will rule fairly and justly over each House of Sin, should any prince request assistance. It hasn't happened; my brothers are more than capable of tending to their circles, but the law remains in place."

There was a slight twinkle of excitement in Wrath's gaze, reminding me of our fight with the werewolves. My husband was a delightful heathen. He wasn't nervous about a potential attack; he anticipated it. Outmaneuvering his enemies was a challenge, an opportunity to create a strategy and use his sin. And if I knew anything about my husband, he'd already had a plan in place.

"If they believe the First Witch is here, they'll strike. So you're going to move Sursea." I eyed him speculatively. "Instead of banishing her like you'd bargained for, you're going to send her to House Pride, aren't you?"

Admiration glinted in his eyes. "My brother was only too willing to oblige my request. Sursea never agreed to *when* she'd be banished. Only that she would be. After what she did to corrupt his marriage and steal his wife, he's been waiting for an opportunity like this."

The memory of Claudia when she was still Lucia flitted across my mind. I shifted to the other side of the tub to face the demon. "Does your brother still love her?"

"Lucia?" Wrath asked. I nodded. He pulled my leg onto his lap and began rubbing the soles of my feet, thinking. "Only he can answer that. I know he's never stopped searching for her. He believes she's alive somewhere. That perhaps her mother put a spell-lock on her, too." His attention dropped to my chest, where my mortal heart had been. "Now that you and Vittoria are restored, he's more determined than ever to find Lucia and see if his theory is correct."

"But did he ever love her, or was it his pride and ego that made him covet her? I imagine she would have been quite the conquest as the daughter of the First Witch. The one witch who was supposed to lead others to guard the realm and keep princes of Hell in line."

Wrath leaned back, his expression thoughtful. "My brother was and is still widely known for his dalliances. Mostly because it is an image he wants to project. He'd never once proposed to any of his

lovers. Nor has he ever so much as spent more than one night with anyone since Lucia."

"You're certain he never slept with Vittoria?" I asked, thinking of our previous conversation.

Wrath's mouth lifted on one side. "Your sister is the only other being that matches him in a lot of ways, which was why her betrayal hit him so deeply. But I still don't believe they ever consummated that relationship. By then, he'd already been trying to work on issues in his marriage, but Lucia distanced herself. Personally? I think she loved him as much as he loved her, but they might have been too dissimilar for it to last. If things were different, if he'd met Vittoria first." He lifted a shoulder and dropped it. "I do know none of that matters until he finds out what happened to Lucia. Regardless of what anyone may think, Pride is loyal."

"If Lucia asked him to stop having dalliances, do you think he would have?"

Wrath considered that for a minute. "At that time, I believe he already had stopped. And if he hadn't, he would have done anything she asked of him. At his court, dalliances are not scandalous or looked down upon the same way they are in the mortal realm. If that was what made her unhappy, he likely wouldn't have even considered it a possibility. Not out of callousness, but ignorance."

I looked my prince over closely. "Is that how you feel about taking lovers?"

He gave me a slow, devilish grin. "No, my lady. I'm quite satisfied with my wife."

"Good answer, husband." I thought back to my friend's memory, how troubled she'd been by her decision to leave without writing a note. "You believe Lucia was murdered?"

"I never found a trace of her when I looked. And when the new murders began, I thought perhaps one of Pride's enemies had found her." He lifted a shoulder. "After finding you again, I believe she may be alive and well. Pride had searched for witches with the strongest bloodlines matching hers, the ones with the most goddess magic, but he hasn't located any direct descendants. He has a chamber dedicated to grimoires and witch history. He'd hoped if he'd found the right bloodline, he'd work backward until he found Lucia."

Wrath continued to massage my feet, and my mind drifted through the tangle of lies, deceptions, and schemes everyone had been involved with, both together and separately. No wonder it had been hard to unravel. When Vittoria had said the devil was looking for a bride, that had been true. Just as breaking the curse did, in a twisted way, involve the devil marrying within a certain time frame. In this realm Wrath had only six years, six months, and six days before all

was lost, while nearly twenty years had passed on the Shifting Isles.

Our bond and my subsequent sacrifice because of it *did* break the curse. However, the murders of the witches unfortunately tangled with Pride's quest to find Lucia—he had been seeking women descended from Star Witches, in the hopes of finding his former wife.

Unbeknownst to him, Vittoria sought the Star Witches, too, but for her own gain—she hunted them down because their matriarchs had spell-locked us long ago.

And Wrath had investigated each of those murders to see who was killing anyone that was potentially related to Lucia. I recalled the night I summoned Pride—unlike when I'd summoned Wrath, Pride had been unable to appear.

Wrath's hand slid up to my calf and he squeezed gently. "What are you thinking now?"

"I finally understand why you were trying to stop the murders," I admitted. "The curse took your wings, but it locked Pride in the Seven Circles, correct?"

"Yes. When it went into effect, it took something from each prince. Pride lost his ability to travel outside our realm, hindering his attempt to locate Lucia."

Knowing what I did now about the night Pride's wife left, that had to be terrible. Rushing home after Wrath nearly destroyed his brothers, only to find his wife gone without a trace. Then to be locked in the Seven Circles without any way to search for her… it was another form of hell. Especially if he truly hadn't done the things Lucia believed he had. It was tragic for both of them.

"And your other brothers? What did they lose?"

Wrath shook his head. "They've never spoken to me about it."

"That's peculiar, isn't it?"

"Not really. To admit to losing something, even a small amount of power, would signal vulnerability. They would not risk their courts. I only knew what Pride lost because he understood how it felt when I lost you. He set his sin aside in the hopes if I found you, Lucia wouldn't be far behind."

Now that the curse was no longer an issue, I wished I could set everything right, but some choices weren't mine to make. Claudia had made her decision before the curse was activated. And while Vittoria and I had played a terrible game House Vengeance had been contracted for, my friend had realized she wasn't happy *before* our scheme. Cracks had appeared in her relationship long before her mother broke them apart. Sometimes loving someone was shown by letting them go, not clutching them closer. Though I couldn't help but wonder what the ending of their story might have been if they'd just talked.

“Are you all right?” Wrath pulled me across the tub and hoisted me onto his lap. “Is it the loss of your magic?”

“A little.” I rubbed his shoulders, noting that, unlike me, he was no longer tense. “I also want to help your brothers. I hate that the mess is only partly cleaned. There’s much left to do.”

Wrath brushed his knuckles against my jaw. “You have helped them.”

“I know breaking the curse has helped to some extent, but the rest is up to them, isn’t it?”

“Standing back so someone can walk the rest of their path alone is often the most difficult part, especially when you care.” Wrath leaned forward, pressing a tender kiss to my heart. When he looked at me again, his expression was contemplative. “Do you *want* to become queen?”

His question caught me off guard. I thought it over.

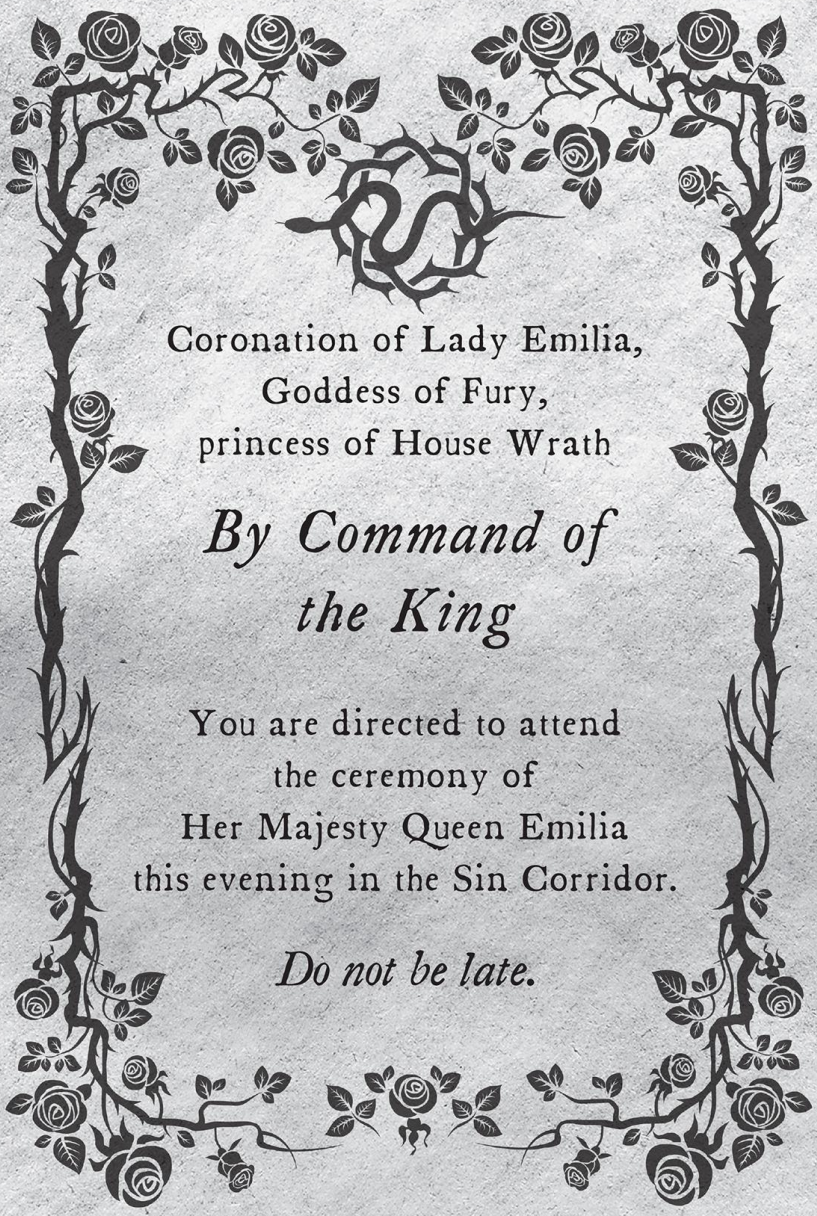
“I want to stand beside you. And while there are some unappealing aspects of ruling, shouldering the burden, becoming a united force, it’s something I do want.” I smiled sadly. “I may not wield the magic of Fury anymore, but I still rule over it. I am happy to join your House. It feels right.”

Wrath didn’t say anything for a moment; he simply studied me in that intense way that indicated he was seeing far more than I wished to share.

My attention dropped to that pale ink on his collarbone, *Acta non verba*. He might not believe I wanted to be queen, but perhaps I might show him otherwise. My lips curved. “Do we need to send the invitations this moment, or do we have a little more time?”

Wrath’s gaze turned molten as he sensed my true question. He hardened beneath me, devious demon. “What did you have in mind, my lady?”

“As if you don’t already know.” I guided him into me, laughing as he cursed softly, and rode him until we both swore the old gods and new.


Coronation of Lady Emilia,
Goddess of Fury,
princess of House Wrath
By Command of
the King
You are directed to attend
the ceremony of
Her Majesty Queen Emilia
this evening in the Sin Corridor.
Do not be late.

TWENTY-EIGHT

"I'll take over from here." For a moment, Pride's mask of a proud, debauched royal slipped, revealing the calculating demon hidden underneath the courtly charm. Gone were most traces of his sin; the magic and ego were shed as easily as one removed a winter coat. The demon with us in this room had earned the scar that cut through his lip, and he seemed proud of it.

Anir stepped aside as requested but didn't leave his post beside Sursea. Wrath hadn't given the order, and Anir's loyalty to his king and court was unmatched. I stood next to my husband, watching Pride slowly take in the frigid cell where the First Witch was kept.

Before his arrival, Wrath had told me this was the first time the Prince of Pride had encountered his mother-in-law since his wife's disappearance. Now, the mood in the subterranean dungeon was tense —as if a match had been lit near an open container of kerosene, an inferno of death ready to ignite at any moment.

Pride's one request was for no one to speak of what occurred in this chamber tonight. His attention finally landed on Sursea and remained there, cold and fathomless.

Had she not still been frozen, he might have unleashed the monster I sensed prowling under his skin, scratching to get out. He had no audience, save for us and a handful of his closest guards. No courtiers to show off for. No lords or ladies to witness him indulging in a different sin. That was exactly why he'd requested silence from everyone in attendance here. Pride was going to give in to his anger, his wrath.

Pride rolled his shirtsleeves past his elbows and cocked his head to one side, his expression turning thunderous, savage, the longer he stared at the frozen witch. His hand flexed, ready to strike out if

Sursea showed any signs of life. His jaw hardened as he flicked his attention to the guards still flanking the witch. They stared straight ahead, but their hands tightened on their weapons.

"Honestly, *you* called *me* here," Pride said, annoyed as he turned to Wrath. "Are you going to let me take the prisoner or must I kiss your ass and beg?"

Wrath held his brother's gaze for a long moment, then inclined his head. "Don't forget your ultimate goal. Sursea will do her best to force your hand, should you thaw her."

"Any other words of wisdom, dear brother?"

"Your pride fucked you royally before. Keep that in mind for whatever game you play next. Figure out what truly matters, and plan your attack accordingly."

Wrath jerked his chin, dismissing both his brother and the guards waiting in the shadows. Demons wearing the colors of House Pride stepped into the cell, sharp ice picks in hand. They'd come prepared to carry away the frozen statue that was our biggest enemy. Good. Having her out of our House and under someone else's care was a relief. If I never saw her again, it would be too soon. With any luck, they'd keep her frozen for eternity.

Wrath held his arm out to me before facing his brother. "You have two hours before the coronation begins. I don't suggest arriving late."

I stood before the massive floor-length mirror in my newly appointed dressing room, twisting to better admire the coronation gown the royal dressmaker had created. It was not simply a garment, but a masterpiece. Instead of paints and brushes, the dressmaker's medium was tulle, thin gold chains, faceted onyx beads, and sparkling diamonds. It was as heavy as armor, but there was a delicateness to it that leather and chain mail could not hope to possess.

My fingers trailed over the detailed work. In the design, bits of each House of Sin were represented, plus an ode to my affinity for flowers. It was the perfect marriage of the demons and me, signaling my unbiased rule over all seven courts. Eight if everything went according to plan. I glanced to the clock on the little side table, then to the arched window. Twilight was the normal state of this realm, but the sky had darkened. Night had fully arrived.

Fauna bustled into the room, tears glistening in her eyes when she saw me. She stopped short and pressed a hand to her mouth. "You look like the goddess you are, Lady Emilia."

I stopped fretting and pulled her in for a hug. "Thank you for

coming."

"Of course, my lady." Fauna squeezed me once more before stepping back and dabbing at the corners of her eyes. "What did you need?"

I strode over to the small table covered in jewels—all options left for me to choose from for tonight—and pulled out the sealed letter I'd hidden there. "Will you deliver this to my sister?"

Fauna's attention flew to the wax seal. A downward dagger with burning flowers. The symbol of House Vengeance. A similar tattoo marked my husband's leg, his way of never forgetting the eighth House of Sin that had upended his world in more ways than one.

Instead of looking fearful as I'd been worrying over, Fauna's lips quirked up on one side. It was easy to forget she was part of this House for a reason. War and battle and inspiring anger didn't make her anxious in the least. She thrived on it. "Princes Envy, Greed, and Pride are going to have quite a surprise this evening."

I released a nervous laugh. "Wrath, too."

Fauna's grin widened. "You two are well matched, indeed. His majesty is lucky to have found you again. And that you were willing to put up with him for eternity."

"Fauna! Did you just mock your king?" I feigned shock. "If I didn't already like you, that would have sealed our friendship." A friendship that I realized I'd been failing spectacularly. "How are things progressing with Anir?"

She suddenly found the clock to be fascinating. "I really must be going if I'm to deliver this invitation and arrive to the coronation on time. His majesty clearly stated to not be late."

Curiosity gnawed at me, but I didn't press the issue. When we both had more time, I'd sit down and have a proper conversation with her and catch up. I hated that things had been so chaotic and that we hadn't had much time to simply enjoy each other's company. My friend looked like she needed to chat and sort through the emotions playing over her features. I vowed it would be one of my first personal orders of business as the new queen—making time for her.

"Thank you, Lady Fauna. I'll see you at the Sin Corridor soon."

Fauna dropped a small curtsy and hurried from the chamber, leaving me alone once more. I returned to the table full of precious stones and jewels, my attention snagging on a ring. Rose-gold vines with thorns made up the band and wove around a large lavender stone.

"I had that one made."

I stiffened at the unexpected sound of my husband's voice, turning to see him enter the chamber. My breath caught as I drank him in.

On his head sat a simple pale gold crown. He wore black accented

in gold, as were the colors of his court, but he also had rose-gold flowers sewn onto one of his lapels. It gave the appearance of wearing a royal sash—complete with a serpent pin.

His trousers were fitted to his frame expertly, and if we didn't have some place to be, I'd wish to show him how much I appreciated how handsome he looked in his finery.

A grin spread across his face. "Later, my love. I promise, nothing will keep me from admiring every detail of your gown. And everything beneath it."

I gave him a coy smile. "There is nothing beneath it, my king."

"Emilia." He closed his eyes as if trying to banish the image and fight the urge to take me right there.

"Come on." I threaded my arm through his. "Some ornery demon proclaimed no one was to arrive late."

"I ought to murder that idiot."

"Please don't. I'm rather fond of him." I kissed his cheek.

Wrath and I somehow managed to keep from ravishing each other long enough to get to the front entrance, where a surprise was waiting. I dropped my husband's arm and grabbed my skirts, rushing over to the beautiful lavender mare. "Tanzie! Sweet baby."

I rubbed my horse's mane, admiring the flowers someone had threaded in. Tanzie loved being pampered and toed the ground as I cooed over her. I glanced over at my husband, who wore an openly amused look. "Gluttony had been certain you'd remember her, even with the spell-lock. You used to ride—"

"I used to sneak onto his grounds and ride her until he'd set baby ice dragons after us." I laughed at the memory. "I forgot how much I loved to annoy him."

"He missed you." Wrath whistled, then turned back to me. "He didn't care what your House had been contracted to do. Gluttony always placed the blame on Sursea, rightfully so."

"We could have denied her request."

"No, you couldn't have." Wrath shook his head. "You are a goddess of vengeance. Just as I am a prince of wrath."

Before we could argue the point, the ground shook. Again. Footsteps. Massive, thunderous footsteps rumbled close by. I tensed, my hand twitching toward the blade I'd hidden under my gown. From the snowbank to our right emerged one of Wrath's hellhounds. The three-headed dog ambled over to its master, tail wagging as Wrath scrubbed behind each of its ears.

I looked between my horse and his hound and shook my head. Of course my husband would show up to my coronation riding a giant hellhound. I could imagine the look of jealousy on Envy's face and had to stifle another chuckle.

"Are you ready, my queen?"

Anir and Fauna exited the castle, both dressed impeccably. Fauna gave me a subtle nod, letting me know the invitation—and request—had been delivered. I exhaled. With any luck, my sister would do exactly as I'd asked.

After Pride had taken Sursea and I'd had some time to myself, I'd thought a lot about my last conversation with Domenico. And my sister. I was almost entirely certain I'd finally fit all the pieces together surrounding the mystery of Vesta. Tonight, I'd share my discovery in front of each demon prince. Even if the witches didn't attack, there was sure to still be *some* excitement aside from the coronation.

I looked to my husband, allowing his presence to soothe me. "I am ready."

I accepted Wrath's help up onto my horse—the gown was beautiful but didn't allow me to swing my legs up. A detail I'd speak to the dressmaker about for future garments.

Two ebony hell horses trotted over to Anir and Fauna, and once they were settled and Wrath climbed onto his hound, we slowly marched toward the Sin Corridor. When we reached the base of it and started up the sharp incline, I felt the not-so-subtle prodding of each sin.

The trek through the mountain, then up the snow-covered pass, went by surprisingly quickly, though trepidation wound through me with each step the horses and hound took. A lot depended on whether my sister showed up. I was nervous to see if my theory was correct. And if it was, how Greed would react to me revealing the role he'd played.

Wrath shot a look of concern my way a few times but would hopefully believe my nerves were solely for being crowned in front of his brothers. He had enough on his mind with any potential witch attacks, and I didn't want to distract him from his own mission.

Hopefully, all would go according to plan.

Our procession reached the top of an incline, and I immediately recognized the goddess tree, though it had shifted locations as Envy had claimed it would. I sensed the Sisters Seven lingering nearby. Celestia also hadn't come to collect her spell book yet, and I silently prayed she didn't choose this moment to want it back. Things would be tense enough if my sister showed up and followed my instructions.

"My lady?" Wrath nudged his hound close to Tanzie, who snuffed the hell beast.

"I'm ready."

Wrath eyed me speculatively but didn't press. His suspicion flickered over me and I flashed him a look I hoped comforted him. The six princes were already in attendance, waiting stoically for our

arrival. Wrath helped me dismount, and the moment my feet touched the ground, the princes lined up, three to each side, forming an aisle for us to walk through.

Someone had created a small dais just large enough for Wrath and me to stand on. Behind it, in the distance, were the gates of hell, towering like two pillars of fear. My attention roved over the snow-covered ground. Aside from our gathering, there were no fresh tracks. No signs that the witches or anyone else might be lurking. I took that as one positive sign.

I also didn't see my—

A thunderous crack rent the air, followed by a snarl. I spun around, relief shooting through me. My twin stepped out from a portal, looking like a queen in her own right. Vittoria flashed an annoyed look at the werewolf entering the realm by her side. "Domenico, mind your manners. If you ruin my sister's evening, my hand will find its way into your chest."

Wrath slanted a look in my direction but didn't say anything. Pride and Greed, however, both exploded. "What is she doing here?"

I expelled a breath. I wasn't even crowned queen yet and I already had to crush an inter-court squabble. "She is the goddess of death, your soon-to-be queen's sister. And the sole ruler of the newly reinstated House Vengeance."

"She is a murderer," Greed spat.

"A title we all share," I tossed back at him.

Pride's gaze raked over my twin. Hatred flared in those strange eyes, but I could have sworn I saw something else in them, too. Something that suspiciously looked like hurt. He held his hands up and stepped back. "Just keep her away from me."

Greed had his House dagger out, blade angled in my sister's direction. "Thank you for this gift, brother. As already decreed, I am within my rights to collect my blood retribution."

"Greed," Wrath warned. "Don't move."

I pushed my way through the princes and looked at Domenico. "Where is your sister?"

It had already been silent, but I swore all sound ceased. Even the wind. Domenico's jaw locked. "I want an oath from your prince that she will walk out of here if she so chooses."

I inclined my head and looked to Wrath. "Will you grant his request?"

My husband searched my face before turning his focus on the werewolf. Wrath was putting an enormous amount of trust in me. An action that would not go unnoticed by the other princes. "Your sister will not be taken by any House of Sin against her will."

Vittoria reached for Domenico's arm, and he allowed her to hold

on. Pride didn't miss the action. And neither did Greed. He stepped forward and pointed his House dagger at Wrath. "You granted me a blood retribution. I am well within my rights to attack."

"You were granted a blood retribution for the murder of your commander," I said, my voice cold. "A murder that never occurred. Therefore, you are owed nothing. Put your dagger away. Now."

Greed's attention whipped between me and Wrath. "Vesta is dead. You saw her remains."

"Vesta is pack," I said. "You made a bargain with her family because you coveted an alliance with the wolves. You wanted her magic. Her power. Your greed got in the way of seeing how unhappy she was. How much she longed to reunite with her family."

I remembered the young wolf in the Well of Memory, the terror of being ripped from her family as a cub. The howls, the fear—it had been a true nightmare. Then there was way the wolf pup had sent a flicker of soothing energy to her papa, which made me think of the unfamiliar werewolf in the Shifting Isles, the one who'd brought my clothing before Vittoria removed my spell-lock. That wolf had altered emotions, too. Had soothed me when I was most afraid.

"Tell me everything you learned." Wrath nodded in encouragement, and I launched into the sordid tale, laying all the clues out there for Greed and his brothers.

It took some time to piece it all together, but the man whose face I couldn't see in the Well of Memory had *sounded* familiar, and after I'd ruminated over the memory in my mind, I placed his voice—Domenico's father. The young boy in the crib had been Domenico, Vesta's half brother. After that, everything made more sense than Vesta's "murder" ever did.

While initially searching in Sicily for my sister's murderer, I found Domenico Senior in Greed's gaming den, intoxicated and gambling. That felt like a lifetime ago, but I could easily recall the pain in his eyes. His gambling seemed to be more about punishment than pleasure.

His sadness couldn't have simply been because his son shifted for the first time. But if Domenico Junior's shifting brought up memories of his firstborn, Marcella, then his descent into drinking and gambling made sense. Domenico Senior had been punishing himself for the pup he'd gambled away. He never forgave himself, and he'd sought out Greed's gambling den, probably in the hopes of seeing her. Or maybe stealing her back. But Greed had kept her busy as his commander, had kept her far away from the Shifting Isles and her pack.

Until my sister arrived, wanting an alliance with him and the wolves.

I'd wager anything that the body Greed found in his House that

contained blood similar to Vesta's had been Domenico Senior. He was dead due to "pack business," just as Domenico had stated—freeing his daughter. They must have been attacked in their attempted escape, and sacrifice was an action any parent would take for their child.

"I don't know what else transpired between Greed and Domenico's pack," I said, "but I suspect there's much more to the story. But somehow, when Vesta and Domenico were in those initial meetings for the alliance Vittoria sought, they recognized each other."

Wrath stepped up beside me, his focus hard on the werewolf. "Is this true, alpha?"

"It is." Domenico looked ready to tear out everyone's throat. "And it's *our* business."

I looked at my sister. "Please. Tell Marcella it's all right to show herself."

Vittoria's attention moved to Domenico, and she gave him a tight nod. He winked in and out of existence, reappearing with another wolf. Vesta. Marcella. She was tall and lithe, but there was a deadly sort of look in her eyes that had been missing the night I'd had my spell-lock removed. There was a threat to her safety here, and she looked ready to battle if it came to it.

Standing beside Domenico, it was impossible to deny they were related. Marcella's attention darted around the small gathering before landing on Greed. "One day, you'll pay for what you did to my family."

The Prince of Greed glared at his commander. "I gave you a home. A title. A position of power. You had no right to make a fool of me."

"You kidnapped me. Do not confuse the matter by justifying anything that came after." She looked to Vittoria. "With respect, I'd like to leave, my lady."

Vittoria cocked her head, raising her hand as Greed stepped forward. "I wouldn't do that, your highness. Marcella has made her choice. You will respect it."

I moved to stand beside my twin and Marcella. "As there was no murder, I request that the blood retribution against Vittoria be deemed null and void."

"Very well." Wrath gave his brother a disgusted look. "In light of this information, Vittoria Nicoletta is no longer an enemy of the Seven Circles. No blood retribution is in effect. And if anyone"—his attention was only on Greed—"*anyone*, decides to attack her, or the wolves, or Marcella, if any act of vengeance is brought about, they will be personally dealt with by me. Now, if all the extraneous bullshit is over, I'd like to crown my queen."

Greed's hand tightened on the dagger he didn't put away but had lowered. There was a tense beat that passed that had me holding my

breath. Finally, he shoved his blade back into its sheath. “Very well.”

I released a quiet breath, thankful we wouldn’t have to fight. Though the dark glimmer of rage burning in Greed’s eyes made me wonder if this was truly over. Or if he was simply standing down for the moment, already scheming his next move.

Vittoria flashed Greed a taunting smile before sidling up beside Envy. Both princes quietly seethed but didn’t cause a scene. Thank the Divine above, we might get through this coronation without any bloodshed. Marcella quickly said her thanks to us, then she and Domenico left for the Shadow Realm, proving my theory about her being unable to travel there alone correct. A moment later Domenico returned to stand beside my twin.

With that finally settled, Wrath and I moved to the dais and faced each other.

My husband removed the crown from his head and held it up, showing it to the small crowd gathered behind us. “As a symbol of our shared rule, I offer my crown to my queen.”

With a show of power that made me want to kiss him senseless, Wrath broke the crown in half using nothing but his bare hands. Goddess above he was alluring.

His mouth curved for a fraction of a second before he held the broken crown to me, nodding encouragement as my fingers closed over the shattered gold.

“With these two halves, we combine our strength. Unifying our hearts, souls, and power for the betterment of our realm.” Wrath placed his half of the crown on his head. “Emilia, goddess of fury, coruler of House Vengeance, kneel, my love.”

With my gaze locked onto his, I slowly went to my knees, not bothering to hide my smile as I recalled the last time I’d been in this position. The power I’d felt then, the control.

Wrath must have recalled the same thing, the cool royal mask slipped. He raked his attention over me, allowing the Sin Corridor to bolster his desire. I noted the slight bulge in his trousers a second before someone wolf-whistled in the crowd.

I twisted in time to see Envy kick Lust in the shin. I brought my attention back to my king, my love, my salvation. My equal. To hear him call me his love, to openly share our hearts and souls, I’d walk through Hell again and again.

Wrath’s gaze burned with desire and pride. “Place your half of the crown on your head and rise—in front of all witnesses here—as the Queen of the Seven Circles, princess of House Wrath, and the goddess of the underworld and Shadow Realm.”

I placed the crown on my head and stood. Wrath looked to the crowd. “Brothers, Vittoria, it is time for the blessing from each court

of our realm."

Everyone yanked their House daggers out and pricked their fingers, shedding a drop of blood onto the snow-covered ground. My sister went last, her focus only on me as she allowed her blood to bead up and fall. Blood we'd always been warned against spilling.

Her lips moved silently, and I drew in a tense breath. I released it once I'd read what she was mouthing. *"I love you."*

I'd mouthed it back, then the ground rumbled below us. Magic threads in the colors of each demon House along with my sister's lavender whipped around me and Wrath, coiling tighter and tighter as the threads rushed around our bodies, circling our heads.

In a flash of glittering power, each of our broken crowns became whole. I reached up, brushing my fingers over the cool metal. My crown fit perfectly. Shouts rose from our family members, signaling the end of the coronation. I could scarcely believe it. I was truly queen.

"Your majesty." Wrath lifted my hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to my knuckles.

Gluttony stepped forward and clapped his brother on the shoulder, then kissed each of my cheeks. "Welcome to the family, Queen Emilia. I hope you're ready for a feast to end them all."

A young demon woman with pale frosty-blue hair rolled her eyes as she moved through the princes. It was the reporter I'd first seen at the Feast of the Wolf. I hadn't noticed her before, perhaps she'd arrived during the murder-that-wasn't reveal. She shot Gluttony a saccharine look.

"Prince Gluttony is correct about one thing—his feast will make guests wish he'd end them all."

Gluttony's easygoing smile vanished. "My dear, if my parties had the ability to kill, I'd personally deliver your invite."

"That was as clever as your idea to lace wine with slumber root, promptly knocking all your guests out. At least that time it wasn't sheer boredom that put them to sleep." She gave him a cutting smile before dropping into a curtsy. "Once Your Majesties are settled into your coruling, I'd love to interview you both. Demons of each court are curious about the curse and if they need to worry about its return. They'd also like to know if love truly has the power to overcome all."

"Trust me, demons are not just asking about the curse's return. They live in fear some superior reporter with a penchant for snobbery will ruin their good time." Gluttony shooed her away, promptly earning a fierce glare. His smile was genuine when he turned back to us. "The coronation celebration is being held at House Lust. We've decided to combine our efforts."

Wrath shook his head and expelled a good-natured sigh. "We'll see

you there."

Gluttony rubbed his hands together, a devious expression falling into place. "You know? That viper gave me a great idea—I think I'll offer her a glass of wine laced with slumber root and kick her and her assistant out. Then we'll see who thinks I'm unclever. At least we won't have to worry about your coronation party hitting the gossip columns."

"It's touching to see your concern for our privacy," Wrath deadpanned.

"Yes, well"—Gluttony flicked invisible lint off his lapel—"if she caught you two like Lust did, I doubt she'd be as discreet."

"Lust!" I searched for that miserable demon, but he'd already left the Sin Corridor. And here I'd mistakenly believed he hadn't told anyone about the boat incident in House Greed. Or perhaps the kitchens of House Wrath. Gossiping demon princes. Gluttony chuckled, and I rolled my eyes. "Go on, laugh. You've all done and seen worse. I'm sure *I'll* see worse tonight."

"Only if we're all very lucky." With a wink, Gluttony spun around and cupped his hands around his mouth, shouting over the low murmuring of conversations. "May I have everyone's attention—we meet at House Lust within the hour!"

"Wait," Wrath said, his low voice carrying over the small gathering. "There's one more matter to attend to." I gave him a questioning look. "Would you like to swear a blood oath and officially become the coruler of House Wrath?"

I glanced to my sister, who offered me a small smile and nod. Vittoria would be all right ruling our House on her own. Excitement surged inside me as I faced my husband again, removing the dagger I'd hidden under my gown.

"Yes. I'm ready to become the Princess of Wrath. Officially."

TWENTY-NINE

"You taste divine." I closed my lips over the blunt end and sucked as much as I could into my mouth. I was trying to maintain *some* semblance of dignity, but devil curse me, it was *so* good. I drew back, my prize still in hand, and admired my work. "I want to lick each inch of you."

"So do I," Wrath murmured from the doorway.

I dropped the spoonful of cannoli filling I'd whipped together and burst out laughing when I noticed where his attention was. The fiend was *definitely* talking about his favorite dessert, not his wife. My bright laughter earned a wide grin from my husband as he fully entered the kitchens. We had just under an hour until we needed to be at Lust's, and according to Wrath and Envy, it was fashionable for the couple of honor to show up a little late.

We decided to come home, and while Wrath tended to the hellhounds, I came to the kitchens to make a treat for our victory. We solved the "murder" of Vesta, cleared my sister's name, and broke the curse. I couldn't be happier.

"Gluttony sent five demons to fetch us. If we don't show up to the party soon, he's threatened to come here. With everyone. And he swore he'd personally escort the columnist."

Wrath's expression hinted that he'd happily choose to fight a horde of werewolves again rather than host a party and invite all his debauched brothers to our House of Sin. I handed him the bowl of sweetened ricotta. "You have time to at least steal a little taste."

"You're right. I do." He set the bowl aside and pulled me in for a kiss. I melted against him, fully indulging in the sweet embrace. Much faster than either one of us would prefer, he drew back, his gaze dark with a carnal need that matched my own. "Much as it pains me to not

lay you down and lick every inch of you this instant, we should leave."

His voice was deep, velvety. It hinted at all sorts of fantasies and desires. Ones I'd gladly welcome as reality. I glanced longingly at the countertop, recalling the last time we'd been interrupted, then stepped out from his arms, putting distance between us. "It would certainly be unacceptable for the king and queen of sin and vice to be extremely late."

Wrath tracked me across the kitchen, his attention never leaving mine as he slowly pressed me against the table and reached down, curling his fingers around the hem of my gown and swiftly dragging it upward. He parted my legs to stand between them.

"I said we *should* leave, my lady. I never said we were going to." Wrath's clever fingers discovered I hadn't lied about my undergarments, and his attention zeroed in on that secret spot that yearned for him. He rubbed the slickness of my arousal until I whimpered from growing need. "At least not yet."

My king knelt before me, his gaze dark and wicked as he made good on his promise to lick every inch of me.

The Prince of Lust might rule over all forms of pleasure, but the exterior portion of his House of Sin was dedicated to the one he was most famous for: lust. Our carriage had only just stopped outside the circular drive when it was made clear which prince ruled this court.

Marble statues of couples engaged in passionate encounters lined the grand staircase leading to a set of oversized wooden doors. My attention traveled to a frieze of an orgy placed above the entrance, the phrase ENTER ALL carved onto it.

I smiled a little at the double meaning. Subtlety was an art form Lust refused to learn.

Wrath and I were ushered in and promptly announced to the court. We strode into the grand ballroom where lords and ladies all bowed low—one of the first and last times a rival demon court would do so when their own ruling prince was in attendance.

"Rise," Wrath said. "Tonight we celebrate Her Majesty Queen Emilia. Thank you to my brother, the Prince of Lust, for graciously hosting."

A string quartet struck up a tune, and revelers returned to their merriment.

The ballroom was unlike the crude showing of lust outside; this chamber was tasteful sensuality on every level. From the deep plum

shade of the brocade wallpaper to the velvet and silk fabrics meant to bring tactile pleasure, it was easy to identify every aspect of his sin's influence. Overstuffed pillows were piled in the corners, welcoming lords and ladies of this circle to lie back and recline. To indulge in simple pleasures like food, wine, and conversation.

Of course, it wouldn't be a House of Sin and debauchery if there weren't more literal displays of lust happening. Couples paired off both privately and publicly, submitting to physical pleasure. Swings hung from the ceiling, and more adventurous demons rode each other above the dancers swirling across the checkered limestone and marble floor below.

I hadn't visited this circle before the spell-lock, so it was all new.

Unlike the overindulgence on display at Gluttony's, Lust's ballroom and all the demons of his court exuded that same sort of sensuality that was pervasive in this room.

From the artwork Lust had chosen to the clothing and seductive glances, fluttering of lashes and… the hunt. Members of this court thrilled at the dance of seduction, almost as much as they enjoyed the actual pleasure. Ladies wore sheer gowns that offered a hint of nakedness. Lords' clothing was made of the same material—all of it designed to inspire lust, desire.

We moved through the room of politely chattering demons, taking in the full splendor of the party. One section was curtained off, and I peered through it. Here was the more daring section. Lords and ladies wore nothing but masks while they danced.

A male couple embraced each other, lost in each other's gazes. Around the outer portion of this closed-off chamber, mattresses lined the floor. Couples moved from the dance floor to the beds, continuing their seductions.

"If you'd like a mask, your majesty, that can easily be arranged." Lust grinned as I dropped the curtain back. "A password is also required to indicate consent. Would either of you like it?"

Wrath took a sip of the drink he'd snagged earlier and said casually, "I would like to be home with my queen instead of tolerating your paltry jabs."

"Oh, I see." Lust's voice turned mocking. "You're angry because you'd like to be home jabbing your wife."

"Perhaps your idea that anyone would enjoy 'jabbing' is why you're unattached, brother."

I spotted Envy across the crowd, and he raised a glass in my direction. Help came in the most unexpected places sometimes, but I didn't care. "If you'll both excuse me."

I rushed away, leaving the brothers arguing, and swiped a glass of demonberry wine. I clinked my glass against Envy's. "Thank you for

saving me from that fight."

"I figured they were having another adolescent argument involving their cocks."

"You're not wrong."

At that he grinned. "I rarely am."

"Humble, too."

"I'm a prince. Royals don't bother with something as pedestrian as humility."

I chuckled, the sound bringing another grin to the prince's lips. It was hard to believe—after everything we'd been through—that we could stand here, willingly, smiling together. "Careful, you don't want to show too much emotion or someone might think you actually like your queen."

"I wouldn't go out of my way to stab you," he said. "So that's progress."

Now it was my turn to smile. "And I wouldn't go out of my way to incinerate you."

"Obviously you cannot wield fire magic anymore, but I appreciate the sentiment." His brows raised. "Are we… friends?"

Envy looked and sounded aghast, but somehow I felt my answer mattered. More than he'd let on. I gave him a disgusted look, not feeling disgusted at all. "It would appear so."

"How tragic."

"Indeed. I'm rather put off by it," I lied. Envy's scowl didn't quite match the new glimmer in his eyes. It wasn't happiness—whatever dark thing he'd gone through, he hadn't healed from that—but it looked suspiciously close to contentment. It was there and gone, and I might have read it wrong, but for his sake, I hoped I was mistaken. Each of Wrath's brothers, my sister, and all our friends deserved to find their own happiness, however that looked to them.

A hush fell over the crowd as the doors swung open.

"Vittoria, goddess of death, princess of House Vengeance."

The court announcer's voice rang out, and for one short beat, the music halted.

Vittoria entered the ballroom looking the feared goddess she was. Her black gown was sheer everywhere except for carefully placed gemstones and appliques.

All eyes turned to her and lingered. She looked stunning—with her dark hair tumbling down her back in soft curls, her lips painted a brilliant red, and the confidence of a woman who owned who she was and didn't give two damns what anyone thought.

My lips twisted up. House Vengeance would certainly face some difficulties as it reestablished itself, but if anyone could handle adversity and thrive, it was my sister.

“Your majesty.” Envy bent over my hand and pressed his lips to my knuckles before straightening. “I suppose it will be beneficial to have the Queen of the Seven Circles’ favor.”

I surveyed him closely. “That sounds ominous.”

“Oh, look. You have another guest to attend to.” Envy shoved Pride in front of him and flashed his dimples. “Enjoy your celebration, Lady Emilia.”

Envy finished his wine and fled the ballroom, narrowly missing an encounter with Vittoria. Pride folded his arms across his chest, watching my sister accept a dance from a rather dashing demon. Pride’s expression was carefully blank, but he called for another glass of sparkling wine, well before he’d finished the one he currently held.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” he said, his attention still on my twin. “Nicoletta”—his teeth gritted together as he corrected himself—“*Vittoria* loves stirring up trouble.”

“You seem to enjoy a good challenge. Enough to be unable to turn it down.”

Pride wrenched his attention from my sister and focused on me. “Your sister and I share many commonalities. Or at least the person she pretended to be shared my interests. I do not know who she truly is, nor does it matter anymore. Nicoletta was never real. My wife was. And I fucked that up. Royally, as my brother so kindly pointed out earlier. I should have tried harder to understand her. We both knew our ways were different. It was our responsibility to attempt to bridge the divide of our upbringing and cultures.”

I chose my next words carefully. “Do you think, aside from loving each other, that you and Lucia were well matched?”

Pride’s gaze flickered over my shoulder. I knew, without looking, he was watching Vittoria again. Whether in hatred or something else, I didn’t dare to inquire.

He shook his head and downed the rest of his wine. “Forgive me, your majesty. This evening is about you, and I’ve somehow gone and made it about me again. If you’ll excuse me. I’m not very good company.” As Envy had done, Pride bent over my hand and kissed it. “Treat my brother well.”

He straightened and bowed, then strode over to the table towering high with wine. Apparently, he wouldn’t be feigning intoxication this evening. Sadness crept in, but there was nothing I could do. Vittoria and Pride and Lucia needed to sort out their feelings. And be honest about them. If Lucia even wished to involve herself again.

Sloth inched his way over, looking every bit as handsome as his brothers, though he seemed ready to curl up in the corner and read a book I was fairly certain he’d smuggled into his jacket pocket. Lust would tease him endlessly if he saw it.

“Prince Sloth.” I greeted him warmly. “Thank you for attending.”

A slow smile tugged at his lips. “One doesn’t ignore a demand from Wrath. But I am happy to have shown my support. Regardless of the past, I know you’ll make a fair and just queen. None of my brothers may say it, but we all appreciate the sacrifice you made, breaking the curse.”

The reminder of my loss of magic only stung marginally this time.

“Thank you. Truly.” I clutched his hands in mine. “What are your plans now that the curse is broken?”

He glanced around the crowded room, pausing on where Gluttony and the columnist stood a foot apart, not speaking. “My plan is to not plan anything. To take one day at a time. This is the Seven Circles, and things change swiftly here. I like to watch what happens after the puzzle is pieced together. What happens after that last chapter? That is the part of the story I’m always most intrigued by. Who rises up next, a hero or villain? There are certainly many more tales that have yet to be told.” He bowed and kissed my hand. “Your majesty.”

Once he left on that curious yet ominous note, I was introduced to several high-ranking demons from House Lust. Between meeting lords and ladies, dukes and duchesses, I managed to catch sight of Fauna. She turned to Anir, and I’d have paid good coin to know what she’d said to make his brows hit his hairline.

Anir quickly set his wine aside and escorted her toward the curtained-off room. *Good for you, my friend.* I grinned. The mortal was detail-oriented enough to be Wrath’s second-in-command, highly trained in battle and war, but he had missed the subtle art of seduction. Fools, the lot of them. I was proud Fauna had taken charge, going after what she wanted. I hoped tonight was the start of something wonderful for both of them.

Something I hadn’t felt in what seemed like eons filled me with warmth. *Happiness.* Nonna and the Star Witches might still be plotting against us in some way, that would likely never change, and the vampires might rise up one day. But for now, Sursea was out of my life. My sister had her House of Sin back, Wrath and I were finally together, and my memories were my own again. Giving up my magic had been worth all the good that came from it.

My sinfully debonair husband stepped up beside me and brought his lips to my ear. “Would you like to go somewhere more private, my love?”

A flash of the last time we’d been at a party crossed my mind. We’d sneaked away to an empty room to make love. This time, I didn’t simply recall fragments. I remembered in vivid detail how that night had gone.

Wrath’s eyes twinkled as I took him by the hand and flashed a

devious smile of my own. “I know just the place, my king.”

THIRTY

House Vengeance was a gothic castle nestled between soaring, snowcapped mountains to the south, keeping it hidden from the seven demon courts in the north.

As my sister had shown me on that magical map, its remote location and magical veil of memory loss helped keep it an enigma from the demon princes and their subjects. Only an invitation, which Vittoria and I had never extended, would grant the princes passage to the realm ruled by the goddesses of vengeance. The realm where the Maiden, Mother, and Crone were rumored to reside.

With my memories now intact, I recalled that it had been a lonely existence. One we filled by reveling in our title of the Feared.

The morning after the coronation party, I stood on the terrace of House Vengeance's castle facing the eastern gardens, icy wind whipping my unbound hair as I looked out at the familiar landscape. This had been my home for centuries. The seat of my power. This was where the great goddesses of death and fury played their vengeance games.

And now, not only had I returned as a goddess without magic, but I was also the coruler of a rival House of Sin. I might have lost my magic, but I'd certainly gained a heart, a soul. Things that now mattered more than cold, impersonal vengeance. Once upon a time, it had felt like justice. And maybe in our world, full of sin and vice, it had been. Now, having lived among mortals, I saw how wrong I'd been. There was more to life than vengeance and retribution. If we went after everyone who ever hurt or wronged us, we'd never appreciate the good in our lives.

Knowing what I did now, experiencing how it felt to focus on the good in life, to feel genuine peace, I'd never return to who I was

before. My life might be long, but I still wanted to savor each bit of brightness that came my way.

"You're quiet," Vittoria said, joining me. "It's been quiet without you."

I glanced down at the wolves fighting on the snow-covered lawn. Domenico was training newly shifted werewolves, and like the damned demons, he'd forsaken his shirt despite the brutal temperature. "It looks like you'll adjust well enough."

Vittoria watched the alpha work through a series of kicks and punches, her expression purposely emotionless. "They can't stay. The pack needs to be on the Shifting Isles with the rest of their families. They need to ensure that the Star Witches maintain balance and only guard the prison. It's time they left this realm alone."

"You could go with them."

"I fought hard for us to get back here, to our rightful home." Vittoria looked me over. "House Vengeance is where I belong. Where I'll stay." A small smile ghosted across her features. "Plus, I need to be close by in case my sister needs me. Your king might not sanction the messier parts of ruling. Which is why you'll have me."

She wriggled her fingers, and I shook my head. "Goddess help the demons."

"And the witches." Vittoria glanced back down at the wolves. "Thank you for finding the evidence I needed to clear my name. And for trusting in me even when I didn't make it easy."

"It would have happened much sooner if you'd just told me the truth."

"It wasn't my secret to share. Plus, I wasn't sure if Vesta—Marcella—was pack at first, but I knew Domenico was hiding something. During that first meeting, when I'd persuaded him to accompany me to secure an alliance with Greed, he'd stiffened the moment they were in the room together. There were only the four of us that night, and it hadn't been me or Greed he'd responded to. I suspected Domenico had hatched a plan and carried it out, based on the timing of Vesta's 'murder' and the arrival of Marcella to the pack, but I didn't want to draw attention to him."

"You didn't recognize her?"

"Initially, she cast a convincing glamour. That, mixed with her ability to change the emotions of those around her, kept me from questioning her for a little while. Once I figured out the truth and she stopped hiding her identity, it wasn't my place to force her to return. Besides, I wouldn't betray Domenico. Even if that meant keeping the truth from you."

For a goddess who was supposed to only be out for vengeance, my sister took the blame when she easily could have given Domenico to

Greed. “Do you like him, the shifter?”

“It doesn’t really matter if I do.” She lifted a shoulder. “He’ll live longer than most, but he’s not immortal. One day, many moons from now, he’ll realize that he’s changing and I am not. Domenico needs to be with someone who will grow old with him. And I need to be with someone I can aggravate for eternity. That is, if I choose a partner rather than simply enjoy myself on my own terms.”

“Does that special someone rule over the sin of envy or pride?”

Vittoria snorted. “Envy wishes he could hold my attention for eternity. I might be curious about rumors I’ve heard regarding his sexual talents, but that would be a passing fancy.” Her eyes sparkled as I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to think of Envy’s *talents*. “I’ve heard his—”

“Please, I do not want to hear any rumors about Envy. I’ve already heard about the portrait painted above his bed, the one where it shows how well-endowed he is.”

“Devil be damned.” Vittoria tossed her head back and laughed. It was the first time she’d sounded like her old, mortal self, and it gave me hope for the future. “I thought he was kidding about that painting. I should have taken him up on his offer to use his bedchamber.”

I noticed she hadn’t said anything about Pride, but I didn’t point that out. It was a wound that clearly hadn’t scabbed over. Even if he didn’t desire her in any romantic way, I suspected Vittoria did feel differently. Something else I’d been curious about resurfaced. “When you got your goddess magic back, did you recognize Lucia?”

Almost imperceptivity, my sister tensed. “Did you tell her?”

“No. I did give her the memory stone back, though. She ought to be the one to decide her future.”

Silence spread between us, broken only by the faint echoes of the training going on below. Instead of metal swords clashing, the sound of claws scratching stone and flesh drifted up. When my sister still didn’t say anything, I continued on.

“If you did form an attachment with Pride, and if Lucia truly doesn’t want to be with him, you ought to sit down and tell him the truth. Without games or lies.”

“I do not wish to be his wife.”

“No one said you did,” I said. “What *do* you want? Now that you’ve got our House back.”

My sister thought it over for a quiet moment, her attention never leaving the alpha training below. “I want to focus on rebuilding our House. I wish to settle our court and earn back our subjects’ trust. And I do not want to answer any more questions about that wretched prince. Thinking of Pride makes me want to tear out hearts and stomp on them.” We both cracked a grin at her outburst, but I didn’t press

the issue. “What about you, dear sister? What in the name of everything good and sinister possessed you to give up your magic?”

“It was either that or the curse would remain intact forever.”

“No,” Vittoria said, a rare bout of anger lacing her voice, “killing Sursea was a viable option. One your prince should have mentioned.”

“She’s immortal.”

“And *I* am the goddess of death. Even your powerful husband succumbed to Death’s poison. Until Mother interfered with her tonic.” Vittoria’s lips twisted in a cruel smirk. “Anyway, our mother is the Crone. Do you truly believe she couldn’t have assisted us in murdering a single witch, even one blessed with immortality?”

“Her niece,” I reminded my sister. “Celestia would not have killed family.”

“You forget our mother has an issue with pride, herself. She would never allow someone to destroy her favorite creations. Us, this realm, we all live in the world she made. It’s larger than just you and me.” Vittoria’s lavender eyes flashed. “And you gave up your power for him.”

I was surprised she’d felt that way, but it was far from the truth. I gave myself a few beats to gather my thoughts, to make her understand why my choice empowered *me*.

I dropped my attention back to the wolves. They were now fully shifted and running through their drills. “I chose to end a curse that would have kept me caged for eternity. I gave up my power for freedom, to right a wrong I’d helped to create, intentional or not. I did not give up my magic for one demon. Though following my heart was the right path, at least for me. When I considered the paths open to me, I could live without magic, but I couldn’t imagine giving up everything else I loved to hold on to it. I chose the path that offered me the life I want to live.”

My sister shook her head but didn’t continue arguing. It was all right for her to feel differently, to choose a different path. I didn’t have to agree with all her choices, and she didn’t have to agree with each of mine, either. That didn’t mean we didn’t still love and respect each other fiercely. We were twins, but we were our own goddesses.

“I chose happiness over fear,” I finally said. “And I’d choose it again without any regrets.”

Vittoria expelled a long breath, the cold air creating little clouds in front of her. “Then I am truly happy for you, Emilia.” She turned mischievous eyes on me. “And if you need anything, anything at all, you’ll always have me.”

THIRTY-ONE

Wrath's wings of flame burned brightly against the twilight sky. We stood facing each other in the gardens of House Wrath near the statue that—I'd suspected, and finally had confirmed—represented a feared goddess Wrath had never allowed himself to forget. Our left hands were clasped together, palm to palm, our matching *SEMPER TVVS* tattoos lined up as if to remind us we'd given our hearts to each other forever.

The king of demons wore a suit of black, though he'd fastened an orange blossom to his lapel, a nod to the flowers I'd once again threaded into my unbound hair.

My pearl-colored gown was sleeveless, a beautiful silk edged with the most delicate lace, but the frosty cold never touched my skin. A fine perk of having a husband with such unusual wings. It felt as if a fireplace traveled with us, even during a storm.

Thankfully, the snow had stopped for our bonding ceremony, though dark clouds gathered overhead, a warning that the calm would not last.

Anir and Fauna stepped forward as our witnesses to the old gods, each holding one end of a vine with thorns. It was more twine than inflexible vine as they slowly wove it through our hands, then up around our wrists, tying us together, both literally and symbolically.

Once the knots were tested and tightened, our friends moved back. Fauna's eyes misted, and Anir blinked furiously. The two sentimental fools had my own eyes tearing up.

Wrath waited to speak until my gaze met his. "When I first saw you again, I hated you."

I burst out laughing and shook my head. "Ever the romantic one, dear husband. Just like the heroes in my favorite romance novels, you

know precisely how to win the object of your affection over."

"Now you know why he's a demon of action, not words, Em," Anir called out.

The demon's lips twitched. "I hated you because in that moment, I remembered. Just as the witch said I would. For the first time in years, my memories of you came flooding back. Instead of recognition or relief, I sensed your fear, then your fury, and I'd realized the curse hadn't been broken. That there was only a slight crack. I hated you because you'd become one of the very creatures who'd torn us apart. You'd adopted their ways. You despised me; I felt it each time you were near. I vowed to leave you to your own choices, to stand aside while you sorted through your own path, even if that meant you'd choose to be a Star Witch."

A darkness crossed my husband's features.

"When I'd met that human boy in the monastery, Antonio, I was prepared to leave you forever. But then you'd said my true name, and I wondered. Perhaps you did remember, somewhere deep inside. Perhaps there was something the curse hadn't corrupted." His expression shifted again as if this admission cost him. "I told you to never call me Samael again, not because you'd said my name, but because I did not want your witch family to use it against us. If they knew we'd found each other again, against all odds, I hated to think what they might do to tear us apart."

"I'd wondered about that."

"The curse kept me from saying certain things, as you know. Which ultimately gave us an opportunity to get to know each other all over again. We were both different in some ways. I wasn't sure if we'd still fit as we used to. But little by little, you slipped inside."

I smiled at that. "Once, when I'd found myself in your mind after the Viperidae attack, I felt your fear. I had the impression I was like a splinter, burrowing under your skin."

"It did feel that way." Wrath's deep chuckle was unexpected and warm. "I'd wanted vengeance against Sursea, and I wanted my wings back more than anything." His magnificent wings flapped to punctuate the point. "Somewhere along the way, I started to want something else more. You. I didn't simply want your body. I wanted your heart. Your mind. I wanted a partner. A confidante. Someone to walk through hell with, and someone who could also show me heaven. Someone unafraid to challenge me, who called me on my shit. I wanted my equal. Fury."

My attention shifted to the fiery wings that seemed to have grown in flame and in heat when he said my true name. "I'm still Fury, just with a little less fire."

A secret smile touched his lips. "When a bond is fully accepted by

both parties, we will share all things in life. I accept our bond. I give my heart, my soul, my power to thee."

The vine on Wrath's hand sank into his skin, the magic flashing like a star streaking across the universe. All I had to do was utter those same words, then we'd be bonded for eternity. This time it would be a choice made by each of us. No magic involved.

"I fell in love with you slowly, though I'd always found you frustratingly attractive." Anir and Fauna both snickered at my admission. "Something I'm sure you sensed. When I'd come here and discovered the Sin Corridor and the subtle magic of this world, a glimmer of excitement flared to life inside me. I hadn't been ready to admit it to myself, let alone to you, but I'd been grateful for a chance to finally act on feelings I'd been desperate to ignore." I inhaled deeply. "It might have been cowardly, but I needed time to sort everything out. You never rushed me. Or tried to force my hand. I'd been falling for you, but I knew it was something special after I'd stabbed you."

"Ever the romantic one, my love." Wrath deadpanned, using my words from earlier.

"It was the first time we'd set boundaries. And it was important to me. I wanted to see how you'd react, if you'd ever repeat that action. You didn't. Even when you had more information, even when you could see potential curves in the road I couldn't, you never once overstepped again. You respected that boundary, respected an established rule between us, and I knew I would have a true partner, should I choose a relationship with you. Not an imperfect one, but someone who'd own his shit and not attempt to make up for it, but to put setting it right from there on out into actions. To show me I could trust you moving forward."

"You both need to work on your declarations of love," Anir said, not unkindly. Fauna elbowed him in the side, and he promptly closed his mouth.

"I love you, Samael. The good parts, the bad, and all the parts in between. Each messy piece—" Wrath raised a brow at the mention of "messy," and I rolled my eyes. "I choose you today, tomorrow, and every day thereafter. I accept our bond. I give my heart, my soul, my power to thee."

The vines on my hand flashed as brightly as they had for Wrath and settled under my skin. We both now bore one more tattoo—the vines with thorns would forever show we were tied together, more than just husband and wife. We were bonded soul to soul. Because we chose to be.

Wrath drew me close and kissed me deeply, then smiled against my lips. "Do you recall when I said we'd share *everything*?"

“I do.” My eyes narrowed as his grin widened. “What scheme are you working on now?”

He whispered something in an ancient tongue, one I couldn’t speak but knew was angelic. Once he’d finished his speech, he leaned in and whispered, “As above, so below. We are now truly balanced in all ways. My ice to your fire.”

“But I no longer—”

Wrath’s wings flared brilliantly, the fire burning hot enough to make the air around us shimmer from the heat. The gold and silver flecks in his wings pulsed, and I watched silently as they flickered in and out like stars. It was beautiful and—

In a flash, the fire and the color drained from his wings. It looked as if someone had upturned a bottle of ink and ebony liquid slowly dripped down the feathers, replacing the fire with darkness. While the fire faded, I noticed something else, something oddly familiar that began as a small flutter in my center. The very place where my magic had once dwelled.

“What…” I clutched my stomach as the flutter grew.

One more flash of power, a streak of lightning crossing a stormy sky, and the fire of Wrath’s wings were completely snuffed out. My knees buckled as the power rushed into me, filled me. My husband held me tightly until the last bit of his power settled into me.

Tears I hadn’t known were falling dampened his lapel. In my center, where Source had lived, I felt magic. I drew back, staring at his wings. Where they were once white and silver flames, they were now a glittering black. They looked like his *luccicare*.

“What have you done?” I asked, my voice a mere whisper.

Wrath kissed the top of my head. “What’s mine is yours, my love. I told you I had enough magic for both of us.” And he’d given half of it to me. The tears came harder, and he kissed each of them away. “Call upon your power, Fury.”

I wiped my tears away and tested that new, churning well of magic. *“Fiat lux.”*

Burning flowers burst into the sky above us, larger and more powerful than ever. I’d expected the magic to be silver and gold and white. But it was still my rose-gold. The magic might have come from my husband, but it truly was *mine*.

“Thank you,” I whispered. Wrath wrapped me in his arms, staring up at the flowers burning across the sky. They were like our own personal stars. “Thank you for giving up your wings for me.”

Wrath’s wings shot out to either side, flapping hard enough to kick up snow. “I didn’t give anything up. I have my wings. I have my wife. And I have some very interesting ideas about our new bedroom design. I’d like to test them out first, though.”

"We'll take that as our cue to leave," Anir said. "Congratulations to you both."

He kissed each of my cheeks and clapped his king on the back before Wrath hooked an arm around him and hugged him properly. Fauna dipped into a curtsy, but I pulled her in for a tight hug instead, too. She held me back fiercely. "We must speak soon, my lady."

"Are you free tomorrow?" I asked. Fauna nodded. "Let's meet then. I want to know *everything* that happened at the coronation ball."

Fauna's eyes twinkled. "I'll have tea and brandy cake ready."

Once our friends left the garden, I faced Wrath again. He was a devious, scheming demon. And I couldn't imagine loving him more. "Does your bedroom design involve ways to utilize those wings?"

A wicked gleam entered his gaze. "Not exactly. But we can add that to our list of requirements."

"What other items are on your list?"

He held his hand out. "How about I show you, my lady?"

The instant I placed my hand in his, Wrath magicked us to his private library. I surveyed the empty room. A fire crackled pleasantly; the candles on the chandelier had been almost all blown out, adding a soft, sensual feeling to the private room. At first, I wasn't sure why he'd chosen this chamber, then my attention snagged on the alcove where a pair of manacles hung. Heat pooled low in my belly as anticipation swirled through me. He couldn't mean…

Wrath moved behind me, lightly running his hands down my arms, then slowly dragging them back up again. Each stroke felt like magic and had my body craving more. "Do you remember when you asked if I'd be willing to tie you up?"

Goddess curse me, I did. "Yes. You were about to freeze us both to death. I had to find *some* way to distract you."

He pressed a kiss to the back of my neck, the sensation causing the peaks of my breasts to ache, needing his touch. "It wasn't your request that caught my attention, but the arousal I sensed." His hands slowly worked my bodice down. "Much like what I'm sensing now."

His thumb stroked over the little nub of my breast. I reached back, threaded my hand in his hair as he bent forward to kiss along my neck, my shoulder. I arched against him, feeling the proof of his own arousal hard against my backside. Wicked demon.

"Be careful what you wish for, wife. Your husband might be depraved enough to deliver."

I turned in the circle of his arms and wet my lips, drawing his hunter's gaze right where I wanted it. "I should hope so. I'd hate for things to get boring or predictable between us."

Wrath chuckled darkly, his expression promising to torture me in the best of ways for that sassy comment. "That mouth…" His attention

fell to my lips like he had some very wicked ideas for it indeed. “Will ensure things remain interesting. For a very long time.”

He cast a ward around his personal library, then turned his fierce, hungry focus on me again. No one would hear my screams of pleasure. Or his moans. Because I swore to myself I’d have him shouting loud enough to reach every House of Sin.

My immortal heart went from thumping to galloping in my chest as he backed me into the alcove. The heat that started gently spread like wildfire through my body. His lips curved with the hint of a sardonic smile. “You twisted, dark angel. I haven’t even touched you, and you’re more aroused than ever.”

I dropped my attention to the strained material of his trousers. “Seems to be a problem we share, husband.”

“We are lucky, indeed.” Wrath admired me for a beat, his attention moving across my face, before dropping to take in my bare breasts. He dipped his head and sucked a bud into his mouth, flicking his tongue until I writhed against him. “I’m going to give you everything you desire.”

“Dangerous proclamation.” I wanted to spend hours submitting to every devious, debauched thing I craved from my husband.

“How dangerous would you like me to be?” He trailed a finger between my breasts, following a line down my middle. Goddess-cursed demon, he stopped right below my belly button.

“Do your worst, your majesty. I’m ready for every twisted, dark thing you can dream up.”

With a flick of his wrist, my gown disappeared. Wrath’s clothing followed next. His raw masculine sensuality sent a searing ripple of heat through me as he looked me over again; this time there was strategy in his gaze. Like he’d taken this particular challenge personally.

“One thing I can promise you.” Wrath stepped forward and clasped a manacle around one of my wrists. He bent to whisper in my ear, his breath sending pleasant goose bumps along my body as he slowly took my other wrist in hand. “I can be very, *very* wicked, my love.”

Of that I had little doubt.

I allowed my gaze to drift over the pale tattoo written along his collarbone. *Acta non verba.* It was the perfect reminder that now was the time for action, not words. I rattled my chains, enjoying the way his gaze snagged on my body right before he hoisted my leg up.

A smile teased the edges of my lips. “It’s high time you *showed* me, demon.”

Wrath’s ebony wings shot out to either side. He looked like sin incarnate, and as his magic enveloped me, I thanked the goddess he

was mine.

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Kerri Maniscalco grew up in a semi-haunted house outside New York City, where her fascination with gothic settings began. In her spare time, she reads steamy romance novels, cooks all kinds of food with her family and friends, and drinks entirely too much tea while discussing life's finer points with her cats. She is the author of two #1 *New York Times* bestselling series, the Stalking Jack the Ripper quartet and the Kingdom of the Wicked series. She's always excited to share snippets of her projects on Instagram @KerriManiscalco. For news and updates, she invites you to check out kerrimaniscalco.com.

BY KERRI MANISCALCO

Stalking Jack the Ripper

Stalking Jack the Ripper
Hunting Prince Dracula
Escaping from Houdini
Becoming the Dark Prince
Capturing the Devil

Kingdom of the Wicked

Kingdom of the Wicked
Kingdom of the Cursed
Kingdom of the Feared